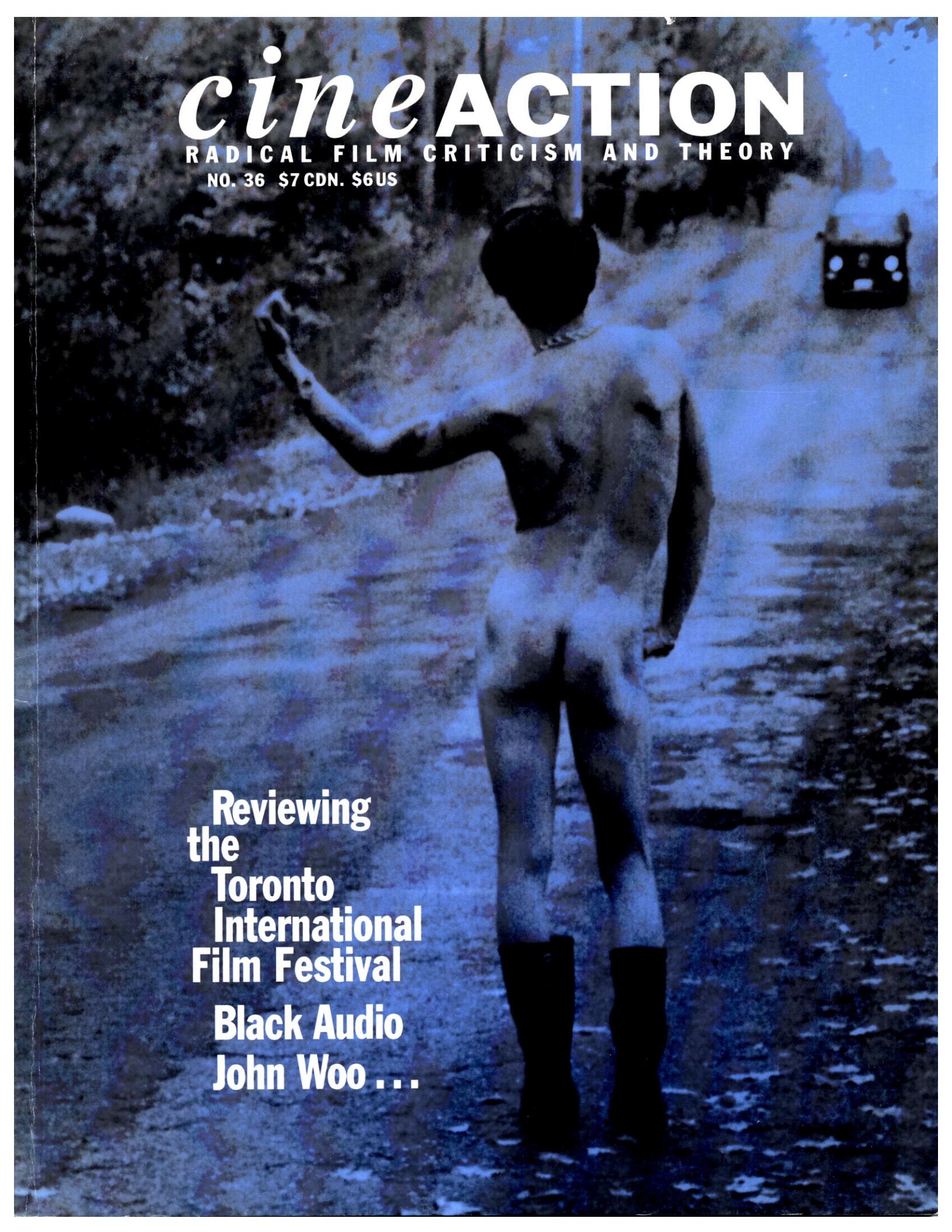


cineACTION

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

NO. 36 \$7 CDN. \$6 US



Reviewing
the
**Toronto
International
Film Festival**
Black Audio
John Woo ...



cineACTION

THE COLLECTIVE

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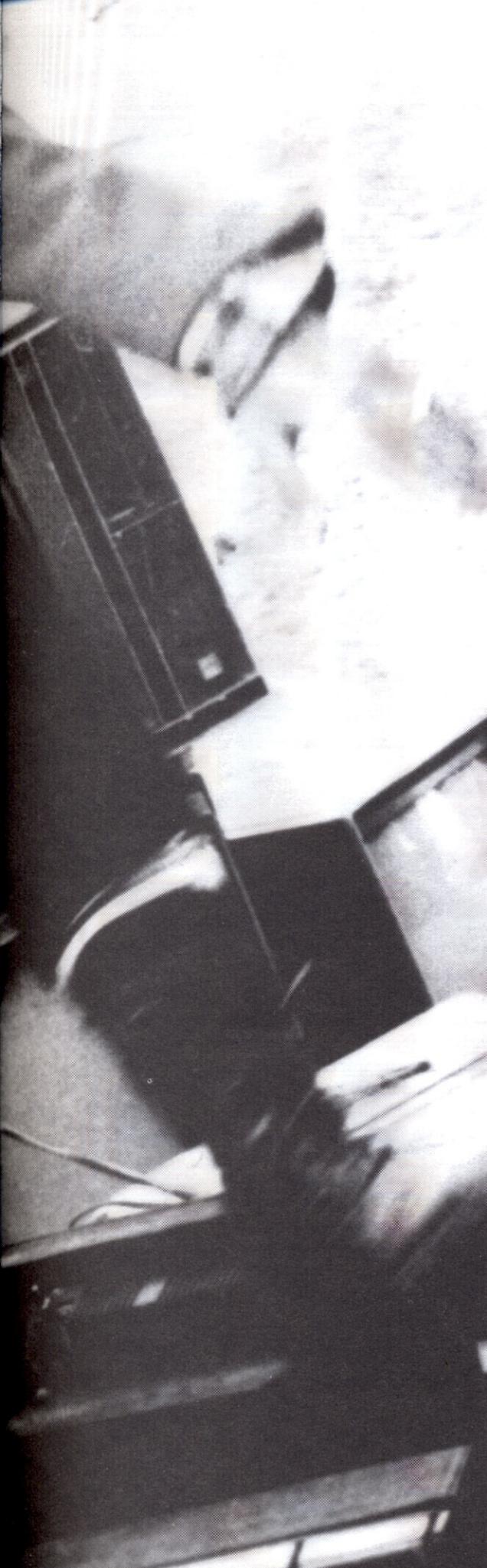
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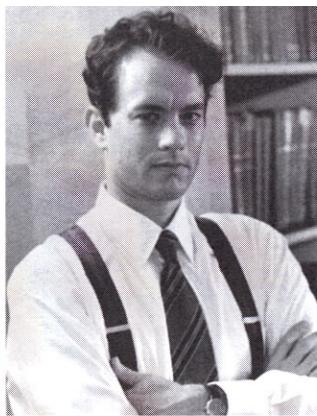
Chungking Express

Caught between the vectors of location and vacation, "here" and "there," film festivals unwittingly stage encounters between the legacy of the past and the shock of the new, between loss and recuperation. Offering a form of travel that indicates a shifting relationship between "home" and "away," rendering borders increasingly redundant, festivals enhance the temporary shifting of social and psychological geographies, compressing time and space. Engendering both locality and displacement, cinema is the voodoo lounge where we meet.

This issue of *CineAction* is devoted to the Toronto International Film Festival, its images and its contradictory functions. In the spirit of the Festival itself, gathered here are reviews, writerly traces informed by the optics of location. Twenty years old this September, the Festival has helped spawn a new generation of Canadian filmmakers and critics who have benefitted from its spoils. For many, the Festival approximates the timely unease of Christmas, marking out the year. Some approach it with nostalgia, others with ambivalence. Bringing it all home, the Festival enables the consumption of and traffic in local and global imagery and bodies.

Festival films are addressed here in reviews from a variety of perspectives. From an assessment of Canadian queer cinema to a history of women's participation in Arab cinema; from the reconstitution of nations and imaginations to the mobilization of myths. These reviews mark, more likely indicate, seismic changes in the act/art of reviewing, testimony to the fact that it matters precisely who writes the page. Toward this end, I hope that this issue is not only able to raise, but to complicate, the issue of writing on the sheets of *CineAction*.

Kass Banning



Letter to the Editor

January 04, 1995

To The Editors,

It is only very rarely that I find myself so thoroughly disappointed by an article or a special issue of a magazine that I feel the need to respond to it at length in writing. However, my great dissatisfaction with special issue number 35, and more specifically, with Robin Wood's "The New Queer Cinema and Gay Culture: Notes From an Outsider" led me to send the enclosed in hopes that it will raise some of the questions that should have been acknowledged (if not answered) by Mr. Wood, either as an editor or as an author.

I do not want to suggest, in presenting this critique, that there are "right" and "wrong" stances to take with regard to either social issues or to texts (whether representational or critical) that address them, or that Wood's beliefs and opinions are somehow just "wrong," but rather that his dismissive attitude toward a whole genre of politically-informed criticism, and toward a film as complex and as artfully crafted as John Greyson's *Zero Patience* is, in fact, inappropriate material for a journal dedicated to "radical film criticism and theory."

I hope that Mr. Wood will not see this piece as an attack on him personally, as he has other criticisms of his work. There can be no room for that kind of pettiness in the pages of academic journals as all it serves to do is to take up what precious little space is available to individuals (academics, artists, etc.) interested in engaging, on a critical level, with the films that are being produced and consumed around us, and the socio-political climate in which this is occurring. I should add that, like Mr. Wood, I believe that politically-informed film criticism can and must address films of the "mainstream" (i.e., the films that receive wide-scale distribution and big budget promotion) as well as films from the "margins." However, to ignore or to criticize marginal(ized) works for not addressing a mainstream audience (whatever that might be) hardly seems just. As the entire "Cinema We Need" debate revealed a decade ago, the "mainstream" is, in fact, anything but homogeneous. Films—and especially films that address issues as significant as the AIDS crisis—need to reflect this same kind of diversity. Greyson's film should not be criticized (unjustly) for doing just that. R. L. Cagle, Fisher, IL USA

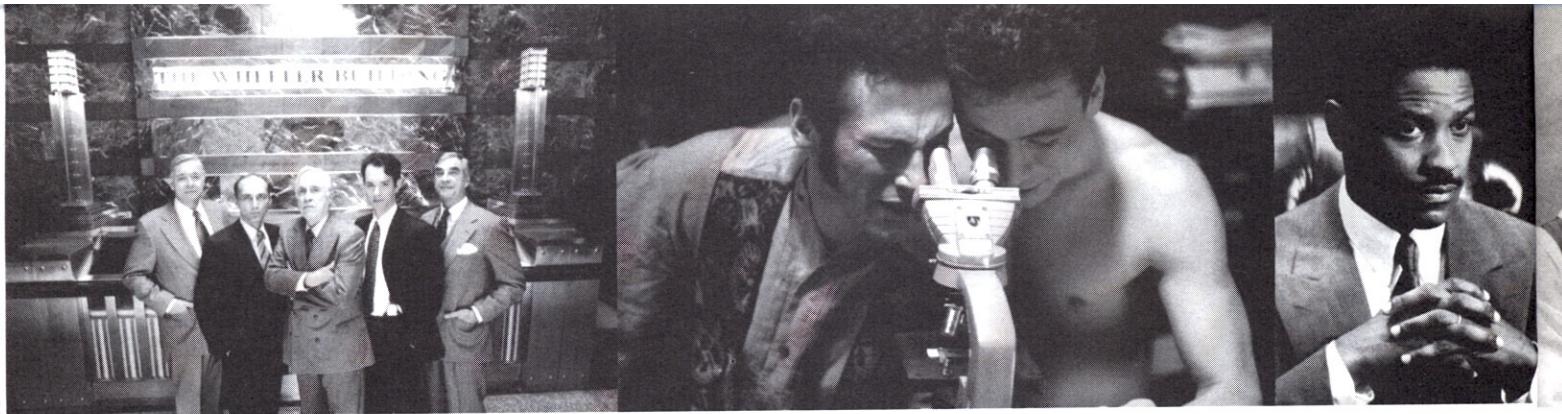
from left to right: Philadelphia, Zero Patience

On the Irresponsibility of a Certain Film Critic: A Note to an "Outsider"

The responsibility of addressing a theme as complex and as politically significant as "Queer Cinema"¹ is, no doubt, a daunting one—especially given the variety of projects and perspectives that appear on the programs of the ever-growing number of festivals and conferences dedicated to the topic. Certainly, one of the most pressing responsibilities faced by any author engaged in such a project is responding to certain questions, the answers to which establish the limitations of the project, define the common terms and themes that appear throughout the work, and provide an overview of what he/she feels the significance of the work is and/or will be within a social and political context. How does the author define the parameters of the project, or even the term "Queer Cinema," under which the project is organized? Is a work's "queerness" based upon the sexuality (or sensibility, even) of its director, upon its content, or some combination of both? Does establishing a genre of "Queer Cinema" (and thus separating discussion and debate about the films in it from the "mainstream," if only for one specific analysis) further contribute to the marginalization of the filmmakers and works included in it by constructing a sub-genre or category under which they can be conveniently written off?

Unfortunately, neither Robin Wood nor Richard Lippe—the editors of *Cineaction* issue number 35—

¹ I place this term in quotation marks to underscore the fact that it is a term chosen by the editors—and not by me—as an organizing focus for their project.



address these questions, choosing instead to sidestep the issue by making vague claims of a “commitment both to the emerging ‘New Queer Cinema’ and to progressive work within the mainstream.” Like so many of the terms that are thrown around rather haphazardly in the issue, “progressive” is never sufficiently defined in specific social or political terms. On the other hand “mainstream” is (mis)interpreted by the editors as somehow synonymous with “heterosexual,” both in their preface and in their essays—especially Robin Wood’s. Wood and Lippe write, “Gays and lesbians have many stories to tell and many issues to raise; gay history as it has been (and is continuing to be) lived is very much in need of documentation....But these films primarily address and reach an gay audience, and while we acknowledge the importance of this, we are equally interested in the ways in which gay characters and gay issues are beginning to reach the heterosexual mainstream.”

First and foremost, *gay history*, as such, isn’t really “lived” but, rather, is the discursive medium in which *gay experience* (which *is* lived) is (re)written and interpreted in another larger (historical, political, etc.) context. Second, Lippe and Wood’s decision to privilege “the heterosexual mainstream” seems a rather self-defeating tactic, given that such a move writes heterosexuality back into the center, into the mainstream, and pushes anything and everything else to the margins. At the same time, it denies access to “the mainstream” to anyone but heterosexuals, re-establishing the binarism of “straight”/“gay” and writing out the possibility of multiple subject positions—a strange move, given that it is Wood’s supposed ability to occupy both “gay” and “straight” subject positions that forms the basis for his claim to intellectual superiority over the gay “radicals” who threaten his intellectual security. Of course, the privileging of a “heterosexual mainstream,” whether in reference to films or viewers, seems oddly incongruous in an issue dedicated to the analysis “Queer Cinema.”

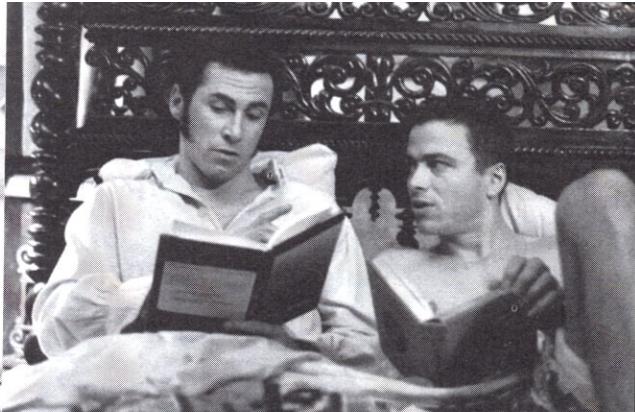
Problems like these take on an even greater significance in light of the limited scope of material that the editors have selected for inclusion in issue 35. In their preface, Lippe and Wood admit, somewhat shamefacedly, that while they recognize the omission of lesbian perspectives from the critical framework of

their project, “[i]t was never our intention to exclude lesbians from this issue.” They go on to explain that if they had received “distinguished work by or about lesbians” they would have accepted it, and add that they have “suggested to the collective that there should be a ‘lesbian’ issue to balance the present one.” The responsibility of recognizing the diversity of the gay and lesbian community thus shifts from the editors back on to the collective, and thus pushes lesbian issues, once again, onto the “back burner.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, the editors never define exactly what “distinguished work” might be, although their own work seems to fit the bill quite well. After reading through the issue, I was left wondering why the editors’ own work comprises just over half (forty-three) of the issue’s seventy-two pages, not to mention the three pages dedicated to Cory Silverberg’s final exam, in which one finds a liberal scattering of quotations from Wood and Lippe as well. Such over-representation of the editors’ own contributions only serves to further accentuate the general lack of intellectual diversity in the issue.

By far the most problematic contribution to the issue is Wood’s own essay, “The New Queer Cinema and Gay Culture: Notes From an Outsider—An Irresponsible Article.” Wood’s piece opens the issue and, given its placement and its author, sets the issue’s overall tone. I find two things particularly disturbing about this essay (although, as Wood, himself, writes in a different context, “the list could go on indefinitely”). These are: Wood’s need to align himself with a heterosexual subject position and the subsequent over-valuation of heterosexuality that accompanies this identification, and Wood’s misinterpretation/misrepresentation of both artistic achievements and responses to them (e.g., “camp”) in an effort to support his own status as “privileged other.”

Wood defines himself as both an “outsider” and an academic. He opens the essay by outlining what he will not address, characterizing his work as “unashamedly personal, and...written from a position that many will be reluctant to recognize (its opinions will probably be found, again, ‘at best idiosyncratic, at worst offensive’).” Right away Wood is on the defensive, and right away he sets out to even the



score with some unnamed other. Unfortunately, not all of us are familiar with all of the criticism that have been directed against Wood and/or his writing, at least to the extent that we can recognize references without context or citations. For Wood to assume otherwise (which he, by virtue of the inclusion of such material, obviously does) merely illustrates what an inflated sense of self-importance Wood apparently has of himself and of his work's significance on a large scale. Without grounding his response to criticism with references to the works or critics in question, Wood's bizarrely aimless finger-pointing calls to mind Michael Snow's camera that pointed in any-and-all directions, all the while constantly switching its positions.

Even as he admits (or fantasizes) that his work will be attacked for being intellectually unsound (which it undeniably *is*), Wood begins to construct himself discursively as an authority figure, establishing his undeniable importance as a film critic by assuming that his reading audience will, no doubt, be familiar with the in-fighting in which he is taking part.

Wood establishes his critical expertise in quite another way: Wood's singular ability to analyze films seems to have arisen, as we shall see, as a by-product of living life as both an "openly gay man" and a "middle-class 'heterosexual.'" Ironically, despite the fact that Wood's claim for intellectual superiority rests upon his ability to simultaneously occupy two supposedly conflicting subject positions (sexual identities), the remainder of his criticism is built upon the establishment of sets of static binarisms (e.g., gay/straight, old/young, intellectual/activist) composed of terms between which no fluctuation (outside of Wood's own, perhaps) can occur.

After a lengthy introduction that details his confused and traumatic adolescence and his eventual initiation into the wonderful world of heterosexuality, Wood writes "I became completely immersed in the mainstream heterosexual/patriarchal culture and especially in its amazingly rich and complex artistic achievements over many centuries....I really cannot imagine what my life would be without, let us say, Mozart and Stravinsky, Shakespeare and Tolstoy, Ozu and Renoir (the list could of course be extended indefinitely)." Wood's admiration for these artists and their works is perhaps understandable, but why he feels that this

appreciation is somehow a privilege of heterosexuality—or at least a privilege that he would not have enjoyed had he not identified himself as a heterosexual—is never made clear.

The essentialism of Wood's sexual "definition" of these artists and their work is further underscored by his association of an appreciation of Tchaikovsky with his own budding homosexuality: "I discovered the word 'homosexual' in a biography of Tchaikovsky (appropriately enough my favourite composer at that time). But this only made things worse: it was offered as the reason for Tchaikovsky's anguish...and there was no suggestion that the blame might be put on social pressures and prejudices...." Wood *seems to be* aware of the social and cultural dimensions of the analysis of sexuality and identity. Why, then, does he feel free to make such a simplistic (and unsupported) association between the above list of artists and heterosexual culture, when such a move merely replicates the same uninformed formulations about sex and culture as the Tchaikovsky biography that he criticizes?

While Wood identifies himself throughout the piece as an "openly gay man," his strong desire—*need?*—to align himself with the dominant culture, with traditional notions of "high" art and mainstream narrative cinema, and, above all, with a heterosexual subject position, tends to undercut any and all of the essay's sexual politics. Wood writes the piece as "an outsider," distancing himself from gay activism and establishing his position within dominant patriarchal and heterosexist culture—a culture of privilege. "Despite the fact that I have been openly gay for twenty-five years now," writes Wood, "and have foregrounded this as a major component of both my writing and my teaching, I have come to feel that there is no real space for me in the 'mainstream' of gay culture, that I live and work and fight only on its fringes and in an uneasy relation to it." Wood goes on to define his difference of "vision" from those of "gay activists," claiming that his is concerned "with what happens *after* these goals [treatment for AIDS and HIV infection, ending homophobia, establishing equal protection for gay men and lesbians under the law] have been achieved."

Perhaps it is this unique "vision" for the future (and as politics backslides into 1950s conservatism, that future seems even further off than before) that separates



Wood from the “‘mainstream’ of gay culture.” As an “openly gay man” who supposedly brings sexual politics into his writing and teaching, how can Wood afford to direct his energies toward some fantasmatic utopian future where we all “just get along?” How does Wood rationalize putting issues like HIV and AIDS or gay-bashing aside so that he can devote his energies to such lofty “issues” as analyzing the importance of Mozart and Stravinsky for his personal identity?

On page 4 Wood writes, “The point of all this [autobiographical material] is to try to help readers of younger generations (the younger the more emancipated) understand why I spent the first two-thirds of my life trying to learn heterosexuality, and why I lived a heterosexual ‘lifestyle’ until I was almost forty. Many of the present generation of young gay men find this very difficult to grasp.” Why was it necessary for Wood to “learn” heterosexuality when heterosexuality is such a privileged part of dominant representation? Wood himself identifies the mainstream literally as the heterosexual, so “learning” it couldn’t have taken much effort. By the same token, why does Wood assume that “the younger [gay men are], the more emancipated [they are]”? Perhaps the social and cultural changes of the past few decades have created a slightly better environment for gay men and lesbians, but it’s still no utopia. Wood’s selfish claim to knowing *real* oppression sounds like a parent telling an ungrateful child how he/she had to walk five miles to school through the snow.

Wood claims that “the impulse of most critics today who announce themselves as ‘radical’ or ‘progressive’ appears to be to *reject* as much of the past as possible....” Wood might have a point here, but as his readers, we can never really know since his argument is composed entirely of generalities. Who are these critics and why is Wood so angry with them? What, exactly, about the past do they reject? Indeed, *how* can anyone involved in critical writing truly reject the past when the very nature of criticism is so over-determined as an historically-engaged venture, especially given its basis in a tradition—a history—of methodologies and its construction around a set of central authors and texts?

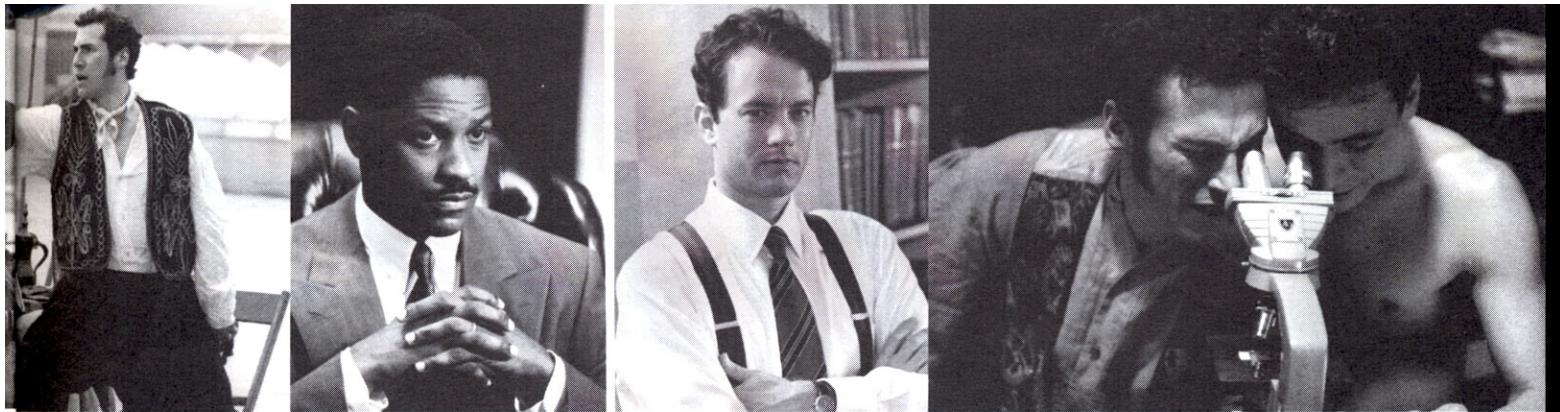
A few lines later Wood writes, “I still feel myself essentially *a part* of the mainstream culture that produced me, while most gay, or ‘politically correct’ critics

feel alienated from it.” Again, citations might help both Wood and his readers. Surely, given his commitment to gay issues, Wood cannot be unfamiliar with critics like Alexander Doty, Philip Bryan Harper, and Kaja Silverman, whose works deal with *marginalized* subject positions *within* the mainstream. These critics never claim (for themselves or the subjects of their analyses) alienation (in the form of separation) from dominant culture, but instead theorize a myriad of reader-identities and identifications that exist for mainstream texts—a possibility that, at least for Wood, seems impossible, except for himself.

“I read English at Cambridge University, England,” writes Wood. “I have learned to be very sensitive to language, and to the (social) meaning of words, at both the denotative and connotative levels.” How is it, then, that Wood can refer to the images on the bulletin board of the AIDS crisis center (and not, as Wood mistakenly claims, of the bookstore) in Laurie Lynd’s *RSVP* as “pictures of AIDS victims?” Certainly Wood, a Cambridge-educated academic who is so sensitive to language, cannot be unaware of how problematic the representation of people living with AIDS as “victims” is, especially given the highly publicized debates over such representation (see, for example, Paula Treichler’s essay “An Epidemic of Signification” in Douglas Crimp’s *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*).

Wood’s “sensitivity” to representational politics lapses yet again when he claims on page 3 (in a sentence that reads as an afterthought) to address lesbian readers and then, on the next page, writes of his first “sex education” session, “[It] left me with a vague sense—which endured for several years more—that the woman had to hold some mysterious part of herself open while *you* peed into her” (italics mine). Lesbians everywhere must have really identified with that one. Still later, Wood writes (again on page 4), “When I was twenty-nine I managed to have sex with another human being for the first time, and within a year we were married.” The gender identity of the “other human being” with whom Wood experienced sex for the first time is literally written out. That this “human being” was, in fact, a woman, is made clear only in retrospect by Wood’s reference to his marriage.

Wood’s attitude toward women is, as I believe



these two references suggest, somewhat problematic. Women seem to exist solely to bear the burden of representing Wood's heterosexuality, and with it, his intellectual superiority. That women might exist as desiring subjects is never really explored in Wood's piece—in fact, it is disavowed. "...I greatly enjoyed the 'heterosexual' family life which I'd accepted and cultivated: I loved my wife in every way except the sexual," Wood writes, as though sexuality were neither a part of marriage nor a part of heterosexuality. "Women regarded me as an 'ideal' husband because I was more than willing to bathe babies, change diapers, cook dinners, and assist at childbirths." Judging from Wood's essay, what women really want is just someone to cook, clean, and babysit. Wouldn't Freud be surprised to hear that?

Points like these may seem unimportant to some; however, I believe that they are symptomatic of the more general problems (e.g., Wood's heterosexist collapse of "mainstream" with "heterosexual" and his insistence upon establishing an allegiance to both) that plague the essay—discursive "symptoms" through which Wood's own identity crises are enacted on a more grand scale and in a form that allows Wood to play the "good guy."

Wood rationalizes his ignorance of pressing political issues and concerns by bringing up the generation gap between himself and a younger generation of "activists," and in such a move finds himself in a strange representational bind, desiring, as he does, to assert his own primacy in matters intellectual (see below) while formally distancing himself from the political fray that such a move entails. This is worked out, at least in terms of this essay, in Wood's constant fluctuation between a "gay" identity and a "heterosexual" reading position. This consistent association of gayness with a "radicalism" that limits the critical and intellectual abilities of all identified with such a position and, consequently, his association of heterosexuality with some sort of authority, with the ultimate and unquestionable ability to recognize "truth" and "art," are both equally troubling. At one point Wood actually writes, "In short, the criteria that I apply to these films are somewhat different from (and I think more complex than) those that most gay activists seem to apply." Because of his ability to watch films "with the eyes of a middle-class 'heterosexual'"

Wood is a privileged spectator. He has, after all, spent some forty-odd years "learning heterosexuality." He is "equally appalled by [gay critics'] general lack of generosity on the one hand, [and their] reckless and (to me) misguided enthusiasm on the other."

Did this unflattering view of gay critics influence Wood as he reviewed paper proposals for this issue? Was he reading these works as "an openly gay man" or as a "middle-class 'heterosexual'"? More important, did his sexual identity (or lack of one) play a part in his inability to find any "distinguished work by or about lesbians"? Of course, as a heterosexual Wood can afford to be "more optimistic about the future than many contemporary gay activists....[T]hey are young: they want full human rights now, for themselves—the rights that I have only recently learned to believe that I have the 'right' to...." He can make such ridiculous claims as those found on page 9, where he writes, "It seems to me that gay people, male and female, are in a uniquely privileged position to take, not just one step, but many: *they are not encumbered with all the heterosexual baggage of traditional marriage-and-family*" (italics mine). Is Wood here referring to the myriad of legal, social, and financial privileges that heterosexual married couples enjoy and to which same-sex couples do not have access? Is it really so taxing to be able to adopt children (if one so desires); to continue to live in a rent-controlled apartment after one's partner has died; or to have the right to visit one's partner in the hospital, even if his/her parents disapprove? Where is the privilege in being discriminated against or, even worse, being bashed because of someone else's groundless homophobia? Furthermore, why is it, if Wood really feels that "heterosexual culture is today (to borrow a title from Gregg Araki) totally f***ed up," that he insists upon inscribing himself firmly within its parameters? Why does he assert his own "irresponsibility" while insisting that gay men and lesbians have a responsibility to address the "heterosexual mainstream" in word and action? Even if Wood's piece were written as irony, which, unfortunately, it seems it is not, such inflammatory jargon is at best only insulting to an audience who neither needs nor appreciates such moronic tactics.

It is, perhaps, because John Greyson's *Zero Patience* is not directed to "the (straight, white, middle-class) man on the street," or written so that, as Denzel

Washington's character in *Philadelphia* seems to enjoy saying, "a six year old could understand it," that Wood feels the need to attack it. Wood's dislike of the picture seems to be based entirely upon his belief that Greyson's film cannot succeed in reaching this "mainstream"—the heterosexuals that Wood has "always wanted primarily to address." And yet, why is this a problem? Despite the fact that AIDS should now be the concern of everyone, regardless of race, sex, class, whatever, it is, at least in the States, still viewed by many (and apparently by many working in the media) as primarily a condition that affects gay men. The burdens of the short but devastating history of AIDS are thus placed upon the shoulders of this population. Greyson's film, then, with its refusal to carry the weight or the responsibility of representation and blame, is a work of great political significance. It is the first feature film to reject explicitly the popular American myths of the origins of AIDS and the transmission of HIV that locate blame not only with gay men, but also with a certain Canadian airline attendant.

Wood's other objections to *Zero Patience* are formulated as part of his rejection of camp; he claims that camp tends to trivialize significant issues and, therefore, such an approach is unsuitable for such serious subject matter as AIDS. Wood seems to completely misunderstand what camp is or how it works. This is painfully apparent in his claim that "[w]e are told, for example, that John Wayne is 'camp.'" By whom? In what essay? In what context?

Camp is, according to Jack Babuscio in his essay from the late 1970s, the ironic incongruity between "an individual or thing and its context or association."² Because the incongruity that camp addresses is usually a sexual one (camp has historically been seen as a gay phenomenon), camp primarily focuses upon representations of gender, and many times takes "femininity" (e.g., women whose onscreen performances, like Joan Crawford's, are "masculinized," while their offscreen behavior follows the rules of "correct" or "ladylike" behavior to a T) as its subject matter. This explains the over-representation of female figures (e.g., Bette Davis, Jayne Mansfield, Maria Montez) in the canon of camp icons. Camp *does* provoke laughter, even in the face of painful situations (e.g., alienation, rejection), but its objective is less to desensitize the viewer in the way that Wood suggests, than to heighten the subject's awareness of just how constructed cultural and social standards of "normal" behavior really are.

Greyson utilizes camp in *Zero Patience* to deconstruct the popular image of the "homosexual" as somehow inherently sick—notions that fill the works of sexologists from the nineteenth century and many dominant representations of the twentieth century (see Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*). Greyson adopts several representational conventions from popular Hollywood films (e.g., Zero's invisibility, the "impos-

sible" romance between Zero and Burton, the characters' breaking into song and dance in the middle of a scene) and then playfully re-locates them within a specifically gay contemporary setting. The "distance" between the forms taken by the film and its "incongruous" subject matter (after all, these forms have established the very standards of heterosexual romantic behavior) provokes laughter in those who recognize this incongruity. As such, camp creates a potential space of "community" among its spectators.

Sure, Greyson's postmodern style of filmmaking (drawing on references to everything from Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930s to the *scientia sexualis* of the nineteenth century) is not for everyone: it requires work and at least a minimum of intellectual reflection. What it doesn't provide is the quick-and-easy emotional-fix-by-numbers of the kind of watered-down pabulum for the masses of which *Philadelphia* is exemplary—the kind of film the Wood apparently loves.

Zero Patience dares to deal with issues of desire (which is *not* merely the "projection of one's ego"—Wood's misunderstanding of Freudian psychoanalysis and its basic concepts is appalling—the very inclusion of Freud's name seems merely to be a pathetic attempt to cash in on the current popularity of psychoanalytic criticism), sexuality and HIV. Instead of representing Patient Zero as some sort of desexualized diseased pariah, Greyson makes him sexy, desirable—a real Canadian pin-up boy—the exact opposite of the image of Patient Zero/Gaetan Dugas perpetuated by mainstream media representations. If it does nothing else, *Zero Patience* shows that HIV does not make those infected by it into "monsters" (or victims, for that matter). In it, Greyson shows that people living with AIDS are anything but helpless victims. The HIV-positive characters that populate his film are all vital, politically-committed people who are pissed-off with government inaction. Greyson details how medical, historical and social constructs inform public perceptions of homosexuality and AIDS in a humorous but *never* trivializing way. His film is an outstanding, if somewhat challenging, creation—a fact that Kass Banning recognizes explicitly in her outstanding analysis on the film.

Near the end of his essay Wood writes, "Older people (and especially tenured and authoritarian academics obsessed with sustaining their own misplaced sense of self-importance) might learn a great deal [from a younger generation of critics]." Perhaps Wood should take his own advice, painful as that might be.

² Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (New York: Zoetrope, 1984).

Letter to The Editor

Is there really a "TV Movie Syndrome" as Susan Morrison claims in your recent issue? The only way to prove that television standards are infiltrating—to use her word—theatrical filmmaking is to ignore the bulk of film history. After all, Hollywood and independent studios have been making films about current social problems for decades, many of which are just as superficial and smugly reassuring as TV movies are assumed to be. Over the years, television siphoned off most B-films, documentaries, newsreels and headline-based features, allowing theatrical films to seem more sober and less trendy when concerned with a serious subject.

There are already several books tracing parts of this development: Kevin Brownlow's *Behind the Mask of Innocence*; Peter Rothman and Jim Purdy's *Hollywood Social Problem Film*; Kay Sloan's *The Loud Silents*. I'm sure your readers can supply more bibliography.

This denigration of TV reached a new peak with the repulsive self-congratulation Hollywood showered upon itself because of *Philadelphia*. Not only had there been several independent films dealing with AIDS but there were many more TV movies. How is it that timid, profit-driven, artistically ignorant, conservative bland television had made numerous AIDS films before a major film studio even signed the contracts for one?

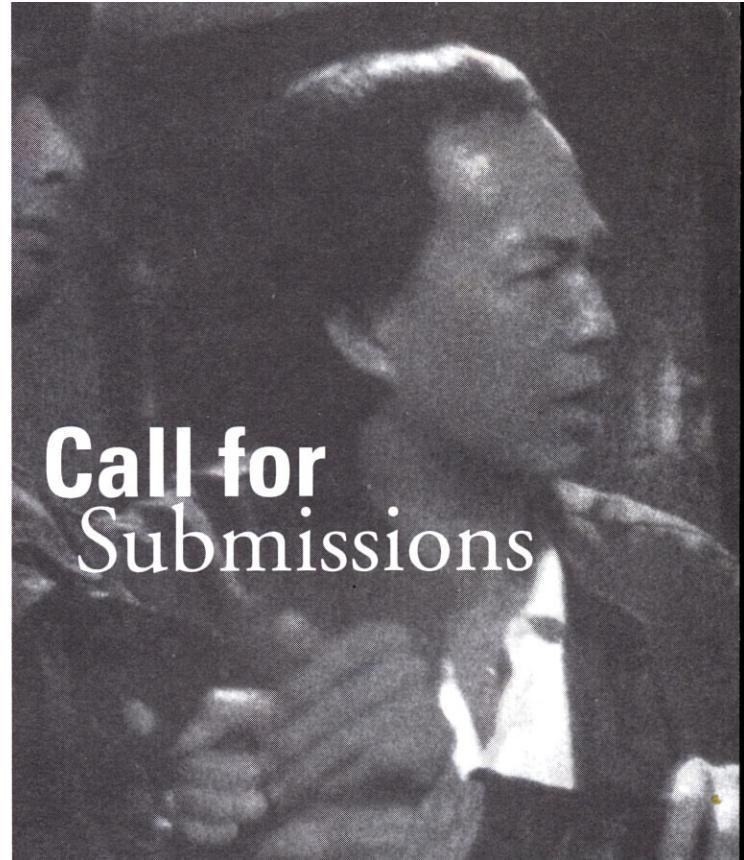
Maybe its true that television in its nature can't provide political art of any value, maybe not art of any kind. But the majority of thoughtful, concerned people at one time have also said the same thing about the novel, the theatre, poetry, even the cinema. As theatrical filmmaking and television production become more interwoven in the U.S. (they aren't always this separate in other countries), we'll see more of the TV Movie Syndrome, which means shallow films in our art-houses (nothing new here) but also genuinely innovative and socially engaged work on our TV screens.

Lang Thompson
Atlanta, GA, 30359 USA

Response

My point was not to denigrate the content of either television or film efforts dealing with social issues. I actually enjoyed watching Lou Grant for just that reason...it was so refreshing to see TV concern itself with the problems of the real world. Nor was it to criticize the inability of TV to produce works of art, political or otherwise. Having grown up with the CBC, I've actually seen it happen! Rather, it was to lament the loss of complexity in form and content, both in TV and in film. What I notice happening is two opposite trends—fast-paced, quick cut, idea-less productions where effect is all, and overly earnest, single issue, totally predictable productions which keep beating you over the head with their message. Both end up with the same result: little for the mind.

Susan Morrison



Call for Submissions

cineACTION no. 37 *Social Movements and Film*

- Popular genres and the politics of change - feminism, anti-racism...
- Experimental, documentary film/video and political movements.
- Reaganite cinema now? Hollywood backlashes.
- Third Cinemas.

Deadline for submissions: April 1, 1995.
Please phone Scott Forsyth at:
(416)736-5149 or (416)537-4548.

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- trends and historical aspects of the American take on death and violence.
- scope extended to include mass media and popular culture.

Deadline for submissions: June 1, 1995.
Send abstracts or 'intent to submit' by March 15, 1995.

Please send submissions to the editor:

Susan Morrison
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The bandit queen

by Brenda Longfellow

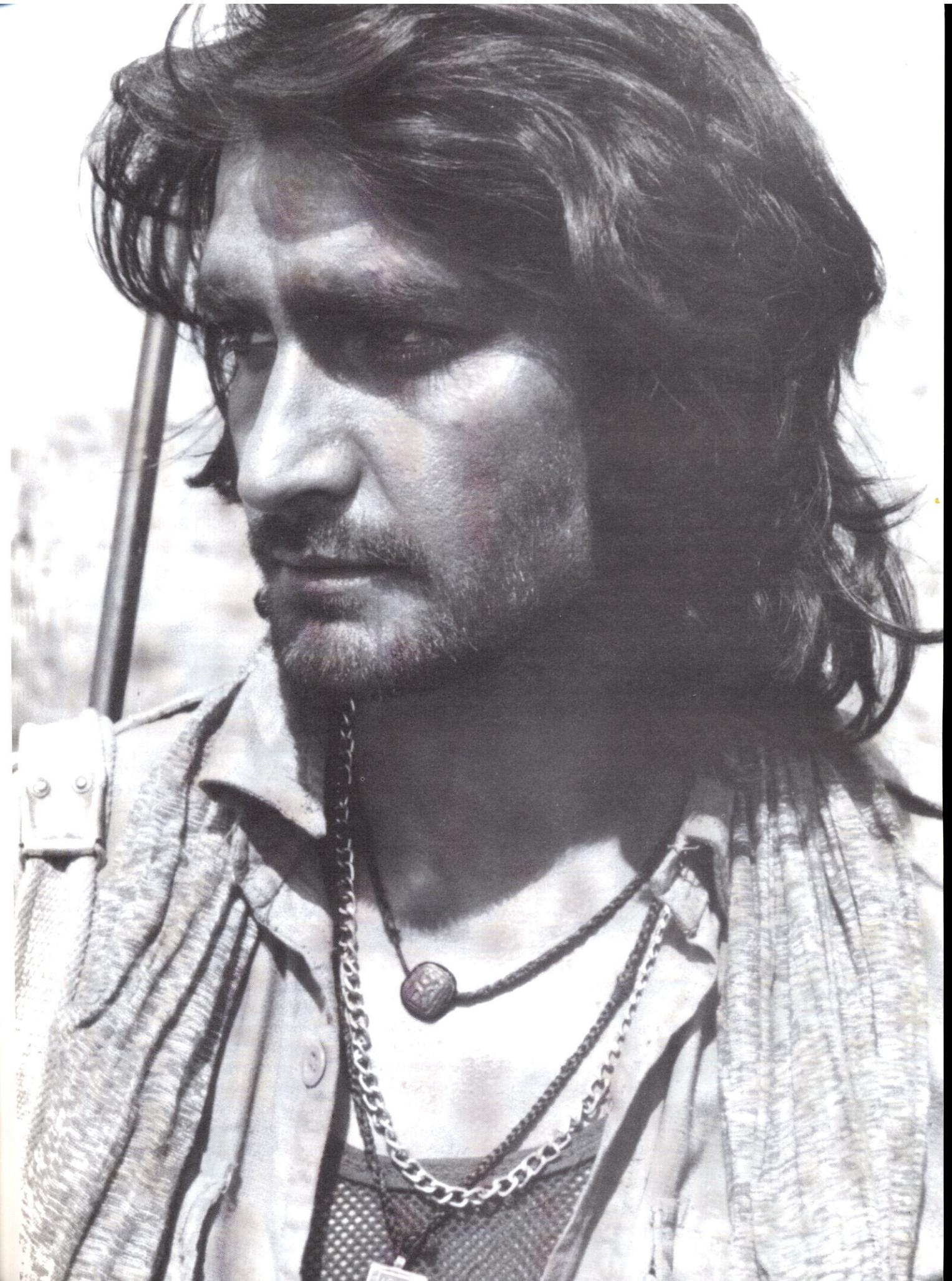


Easily the most controversial film presented at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, Shekhar Kapur's *The Bandit Queen*, arrived in a flurry of controversy, generating full-house audiences, heated debate and delicious grist for the publicity mill. Across the ocean, the putative subject of the film, Phoolan Devi, had publicly condemned the film (ostensibly based on her diaries) and sent a letter to the Festival threatening to sue. A press conference was staged, and the director of the Festival avowed that he is satisfied that the movie is based on Devi's own testimony, that she freely sold the rights to her story to Channel Four (the film's co-producer) and that *The Bandit Queen* does not condone the denigration of women.¹

How do we hear this voice of Phoolan Devi, her refusal to authenticate her representation? Her voice, the voice of a lower-caste illiterate woman in India, only arrives through the lawyers or the high caste political handlers that some claim surround her. When asked the reason for Devi's disavowal, director Shekhar Kapur replied that she is "being manipulated." He elaborated: "In a country where women can only enter politics as post-menopausal asexual beings, she objects to her portrayal as a sexual being."²

What is being staged in this very public conflict around the ownership of a representation, where the gender and placement of the protagonists (female/object; male/subject-director) could certainly be read as a reenactment of the classic binary pair of Western feminism. While that reading holds some currency, I'd like to suggest that an all too moral condemnation of appropriation or mis-representation does not pay sufficient attention to the way the text and the event of the film are complicated by the specific contradictions of post-coloniality.

"Can the subaltern speak?" This is a question that Gayatri Spivak's writing consistently addresses, a question that refers to



the same set of material and social effects of post-colonialism that produces a text like *The Bandit Queen*. Spivak ends her essay by baldly concluding: "The subaltern cannot speak." "There is no virtue," she adds, "in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item."³

What Spivak is referring to is obviously not the level of the micropolitical, where linguistic utterances by women do occur in "everyday" life. Her comment rather is pitched at the level of the structural effects of the international division of labour, caste and class hierarchies in which the representation of the subaltern woman can only be produced as a literal absence, in the shadows.⁴

Yet something is heard, there is a discursive effect produced by Phoolan Devi's disavowal, a disturbance in the reception of the film. Something is dislodged, placed under the mark of suspicion: the film's claim to be based on an actual historical referent. Once that claim is dislodged, the film's self-presentation as a "progressive," "feminist" text also comes under interrogation. Let me be clear that the reception context I am addressing is the West, my own locatedness as a white Western feminist, with only the most cursory access to the nuances of Indian culture, religion, folklore and myth. *The Bandit Queen* will be read very differently in India, given the cultural specificity of the viewing context, the popular familiarity with the legend, and the way in which the Phoolan Devi figure acts as a palimpsest of the goddess Kali and other mythic characters.⁵ In the final instance, the Indian government's demand that thirty scenes be cut from the film ensures that the text of *The Bandit Queen* will arrive in a significantly different form.

I would like to step back in order to track that process by which Phoolan Devi (the historical subject) comes to be caught in representation. The film begins with three significant intertitles situated to frame our reading of the fiction that will follow. The first reads: "This is a true story." The second endeavours to situate the "source" for the events depicted in the deeply religious traditions of Hindu culture and is drawn from a book of Hindu religious scriptures. It reads: "Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten." The third reads: "The events in this film are based on the dictated prison diaries of Phoolan Devi - 'Goddess of Flowers' - the Bandit Queen." Called, thus, to authenticate the fiction, Devi is represented as an intentional subject, a subject of her own representation. It turns out, however, that this "diary" does

not exist as an autonomous artifact, but is rather dispersed and embedded in a book, *India's Bandit Queen*, written in English by Mala Sen, who also takes the screenwriting credit for the film.

Like Spivak, Sen is a post-colonial intellectual, self-described as "middle class," a subject who moves effortlessly between metropolitan centre and native country, who signs the foreword, Kodaikanal, India, but claims that at the time of Phoolan Devi's surrender she was working in London.⁶ Her fluency in the native culture is matched by her eventual access to resources of the first world: Channel Four and development support for a documentary on Phoolan Devi.

The book clearly indicates that, for the most part, Mala Sen was forbidden access to Phoolan Devi by prison authorities and conducted her interview by passing questions through other family members. For three years, Sen notes, she also received instalments of Devi's "prison diaries," which were dictated and handwritten in Hindi by "a variety of scribes" and translated by professionals, as Sen's own knowledge of written Hindi had not been exercised since public school.

The real subject of *India's Bandit Queen* is the investigating journalist herself, the book a fully reflexive account of her desire for this other, a record of the many obstacles, mishaps and characters encountered in her quest. In the book, the original "voice" testimony of Phoolan Devi recedes to one faint discursive thread as the story of Devi's adventures is narrated through a variety of sources: journalist accounts, police and court records, third party interviews. It is the voice of Sen, the author, that provides narrative coherence (and point of view), filling in the gaps, assigning meaning or psychological motivation, slipping into the present tense to add dramatic flourish and detail.

What is at issue here is not simply the fact that Phoolan Devi's voice only arrives in the book through the distorting prism of physical and cultural translation. The question we could ask here is what is the nature of the representational transaction between these two women: Mala Sen (post-colonial intellectual) and Phoolan Devi (subaltern subject)?

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak makes a crucial distinction between representation as proxy (as in "speaking for"/ a political representative) and representation as portrait (re-presentation in art or philosophy). In the former instance, the mediation of a subject speaking for another subject is explicit, and the justness of the representation can be debated, approved or scorned. In the latter instance (with-

in the artistic practice of realism, for example), that process of mediation is all too often effaced as the “correctness” of the representation is based on truth claims and “accuracy.” Here Spivak is particularly critical of contemporary theorizing which, while bent on the deconstruction of the sovereign subject, resurrects the same in political rhetoric, which continues to assume that oppressed subjects “speak, act and know for themselves.” The subaltern, as Spivak insists, only “speaks” via the intervention of another. To deny otherwise is to deny both the structural effects of imperialism and the ethical responsibilities implicit in any form of representation.

Sen is clearly aware of the ethical responsibility of “speaking for,” which comes into particular focus around her representation of rape. In the book, Phoolan Devi’s testimony makes no explicit reference to sexual assault. When asked pointblank by the author, she will say only “they had plenty of fun at my expense.”⁷ The naming of the event “rape” with its fully legal implications is, thus, taken over by the author who observes: “It is not unusual for women all over the world, and particularly in India, to resist discussing the sexual abuse they have been subjected to, surrounded as they are by a society that holds them responsible for the acts of violence against them and taints them with self-images of weakness and impurity.”⁸ As the possibility of naming the event is dependent on caste and class privilege, Sen uses hers to fill the gaps in Devi’s own narration, reading those silences through the prism of feminism as fully significant of patriarchal social relations.

What happens to the ethics of representation in the translation of book to screen, in the move which substitutes the feminist author by a male film director?

Like Mala Sen, director Shekhar Kapur is an “upper caste Hindu,” who divides his time between London (working at Channel Four) and India (where he is an actor). In the film’s publicity material, he represents his authorial function as one of “speaking for” the subaltern, positioning himself in the place of the woman, the place of the male feminist. “I have tried to shoot Phoolan’s unstructured, relentless world as she may have viewed it,” he observes, “sometimes based on her own words, sometimes based on my own interpretation of what she was hiding behind her words. But how do you guess what the mind and indeed the soul goes through when she is being gang raped? The body perhaps accepts the pain, but how does the mind escape debasement and the humiliation? ...As a man, I have done my best to understand.”⁹

Co-produced by Channel Four, with its impressive and singular history of institutional support for progressive cinema, the *Bandit Queen* joins films like *Bhaji on the Beach*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* as critical and counter hegemonic representations of post coloniality.

What intervenes is the institution of cinema. *The Bandit Queen* is the sort of film Christian Metz described as “one of those narrative representational films—not necessarily made in Hollywood—that we think of when we talk about ‘going to the pictures’; the type of picture that it is the function of the film industry to produce. Not simply the film industry, but, more widely, the whole contemporary cinematic institution.”¹⁰

Sumptuous in visual detail and design, *The Bandit Queen* fully utilizes narrative codes, the heterosexual romance and the formal syntax of the “international” style. Any of the marks of an enunciating subject (the kind so evident in the book where the investigator’s subjectivity and desire are fully a part of the text) have been taken over by the disembodied, third person voice of History. Here is a story without an author, where the process of enunciation is eclipsed by the fixity and *fait accompli* of “always...already ‘completed’ events.”¹¹ In *The Bandit Queen* this relentlessness and inevitability of the narration is further reinforced through the ominous superimposition of “actual” historical dates, “May 1979,” etc. (something is about to happen, something already known).

As fictional body, the figure of Phoolan Devi appears less as an intentional subject than as an object of her own fatal destiny. Here, too, the distinction between book and film demands some

¹ Sid Adilman, “Movie angers India’s censors and real bandit queen,” *Toronto Star*, September 11, 1994.

² Ibid.

³ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p.308.

⁴ “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply involved in shadow.” Ibid, p.287.

⁵ Mala Sen, *India’s Bandit Queen/The True Story of Phoolan Devi*. London: Harper Collins, 1991, p.xxiii.

⁶ Ibid, p.8.

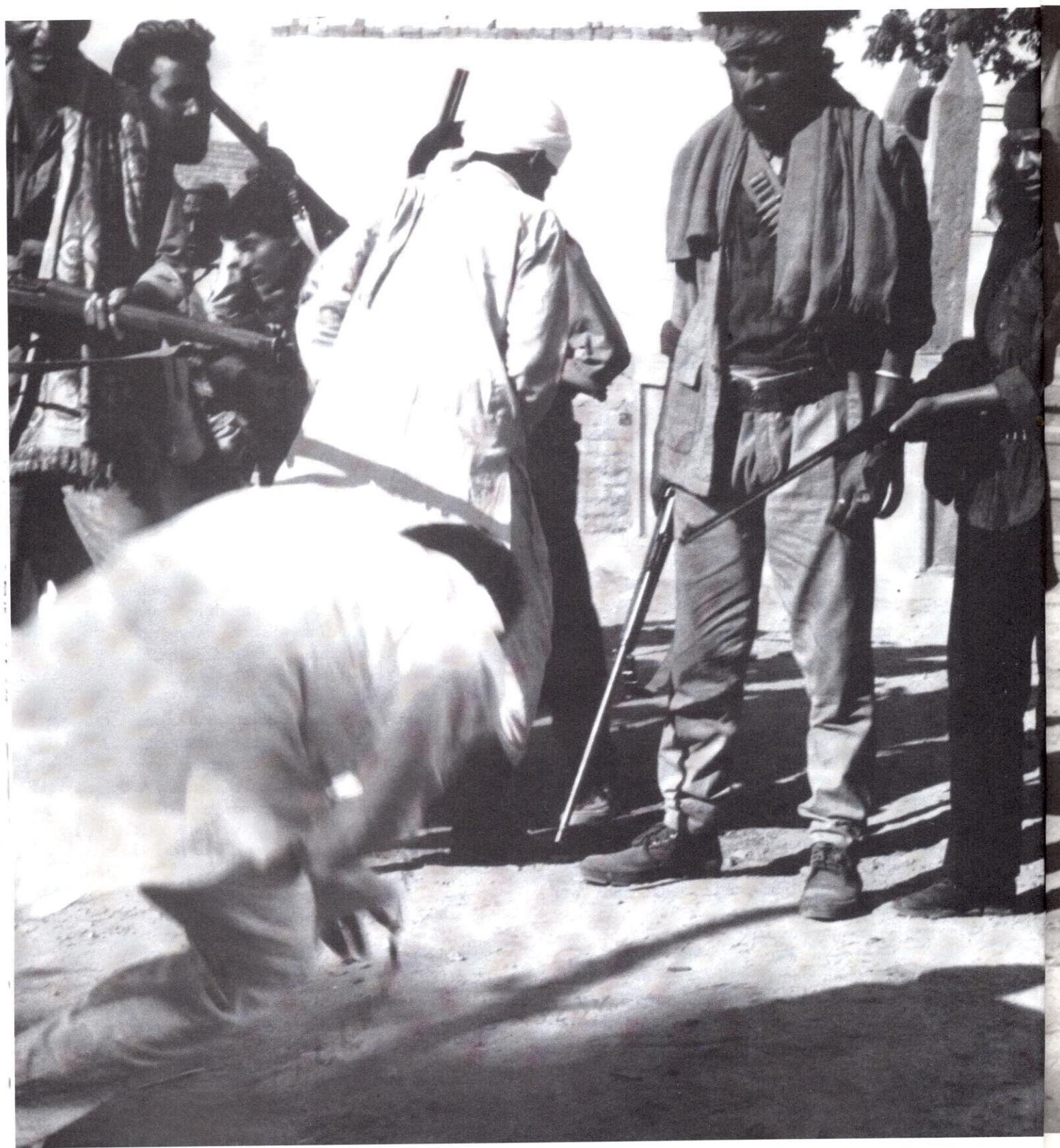
⁷ Ibid, p.61.

⁸ Ibid, p.61.

⁹ Shekhar Kapur, “Director’s Notes,” Alliance Film publicity package.

¹⁰ Christian Metz, “History/discourse: a note on two voyeurisms,” *Theories of Authorship*, ed. John Caughey. London: Routledge, 1981, p.225.

¹¹ Ibid, p.226.





remark. There is a narrative line in the book, absent in the film, that concerns Devi's vocal and persistent objections to the expropriation of her father's land by his uncle and nephew. It is, in fact, her occupation of this field (in Ghandi-like protest) as a child that provokes the wrath of the Thakurs (landowners) of her village who demand she be married and sent away. As Devi's sister observed, this event "marked the beginning of the long chain of events that were to follow."¹² While the book thus represents Devi as a political subject with a profound sense of justice, a subject who embodies the millennial class and caste resentment of the landless peasantry in India, this aspect is rather faint in the film.

Within the relentless cause and effect of the film's narration, the Devi character's function is consistently one of reacting to events: her rape as a child bride, the gang rape, the death of Vikram, etc. Her "portrait" is produced through exteriorized action rather than through interiorized psychological conflict. Violence begets violence. Event begets event. The particular visual matching of the gang rape scene with the scene of the massacre (the use of slow motion, overexposure, the dream-like, surreal quality of the action) speaks only to the issue of the generalized violence of the world depicted.

It should be pointed out that the overarching verisimilitude in *The Bandit Queen* (the drive to authenticate the fiction as actual historical referent) and the linearity of its narrative are foreign to mainstream Indian film production. As Sumita Chakravarty has observed: "the conventions of realism are gen-

erally absent from India's oral storytelling traditions (which the Bombay cinema partly draws upon) with their digressions, asides, stories within stories, interposed political, social, or philosophical commentary, and the like."¹³ The film's "international" style has to be situated in relation to the contradictions of post-colonial cultural production, riven as it is by factors of class, caste and the tension between tradition and modernity. While the film's use of the international style represents a response to the homogenizing aesthetic demands of the international marketplace, it is not the only consideration.

Chakravarty, in fact, insists that the use of realism within Indian culture can be very specifically situated: "Strong ideas about individualism, democracy, linear time, and material progress go against the grain of Indian philosophical speculations and experiential value systems; however, the educated middle class was affected by Western ideas, and 'realism' as a representational strategy in fiction was one way of coping with the processes of industrialization and modernity."¹⁴

Chakravarty's observation helps to situate *The Bandit Queen* in the way in which the conflict between tradition and modernity is so often played out around the issue of the status of women. Within the film, this particular play of influences is bound up with the uncanny temporality of the film.

Within the mise-en-scene, there is little or no indication of a specific time period. Up to the superimposition of the first title and the subsequent scenes set in the city, the traditional Indian costume worn

¹² Ibid, *India's Bandit Queen*, p.32.

¹³ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, p.85.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.83.

by the characters, the village setting with its communal well and river could belong to any period within the timeless feudal past of the Indian countryside. This is the space, as Spivak writes, with “no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism...outside of organized labor, below the attempted reversals of capital logic.”¹⁵ Equally, gender relations are represented as the most feudal articulation of patriarchy: the child bride passed from father to despotic husband, the appallingly frequent and brutal use of rape as a mechanism of social control over the wayward and independent woman, “tradition,” in its most galling and patriarchal form.

Apart from the intertitles which set the scene in the more recent past (1968-1981), there are two signifiers of modernity within the film: the immense highway trestle and the railroad, which are both crossed by Devi at significant points within the narration. There is a certain irony about their placement within the mise-en-scene as they arch into the horizon, cutting the frame in half and introducing a doubled sense of temporality into the film. Modernity may be proximate to the village life depicted in the film, but its effects (“progress,” “technology” and “development”) cannot penetrate the intractability of feudal existence.

But modernity, and specifically the feminist consciousness within modernity, is what enables the film. It is what draws attention to the Phoolan Devi character, distracting Mala Sen in London and allowing Shekhar Kapur to imagine himself in the place of a woman. From the vantage point of modernity, Phoolan Devi is interesting because she can be read as a proto-feminist, a woman who, within the context of a feudal-patriarchal society, defies tradition. While this doubled temporality remains fully unconscious in the film, it is the focus of an extremely interesting comment in Mala Sen’s book:

Although Phoolan Devi was not aware of it, around this time, about the mid-1970’s, women’s groups in urban centres up and down the country, groups reflecting various shades of feminism, were highlighting experiences such as hers....The connection between words and life, the disconnection between experience and action were, almost universally, the sign of the times and the fact that a woman like Phoolan Devi—or hundreds of thousands like her, scattered throughout the villages of India—felt no affinity with nor were aware of “the movement” is merely a reflection of the movement itself, of its lack of experience...the women at

the heart of the events on which [feminists] campaigned remained faceless, if not nameless.¹⁶

While Sen’s conclusion is simplistic—as if any particular voluntarist action could overcome the inherited weight of centuries of underdevelopment, her awareness of the irreducible gap between the temporalities of modernity and tradition is crucial. For Sen that gap is also spatial, marking the geographical and cultural distance between city and village, urban and rural, a gap that is reproduced at the level of representation, “the disconnection,” as she puts it, “between words and life.”

Here we return to Spivak’s question, “Can the subaltern speak?” Between a “pious” liberalism which ignores the structural prohibitions to subaltern speech and the reification and homogenization of the Third World Woman in contemporary Western theory, Spivak raises a different issue: the role of the post-colonial critic and writer in the representation of the subaltern. Her insight that “the subaltern’s view, will, presence can be no more than a theoretical fiction,” that any original utterance “will probably never be recovered,” points to the necessary mediating role of the elite intellectual, artist or political activist. The delegation of representation, however, demands an ethical responsibility on the part of the intellectual to acknowledge that her production of the subaltern’s voice is only produced across the gap between tradition and modernity. Given that distance, the certainty of any representation must be shattered, as Spivak puts it, “by the wedge of unreasonable uncertainty.”¹⁷

By way of a conclusion, let me suggest that one of the primary differences between the book and the film version of Phoolan Devi’s life relates to the ethical acknowledgment of “unreasonable uncertainty.” What intervenes in the passage from book to film, what gets lost in the translation is precisely the acknowledgment that any representation of Phoolan Devi is, necessarily, incomplete, a fact that Devi’s letter to the Festival quickly recalls.

I would like to thank Firoza Elavia and Nadia Habib for their insights into *The Bandit Queen*.

¹⁵ Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. London: Routledge, 1993, p.78.

¹⁶ Ibid, *India’s Bandit Queen*, p.53.

¹⁷ Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds/Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1987, p.185.

E C L I P S E



b y P E T E R H A R C O U R T

As in the soft and sweet eclipse
when soul meets soul on lovers' lips.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Throughout the ages different civilizations have looked up at the configurations of stars and have speculated about their significance. might they conceal the key to the universe, Might they augur terrestrial change?

Particularly arresting have been the dramatic manifestations of comets and eclipses. Even in today's largely secular world, these heavenly happenings generate a sense of wonder. The vastness of the theatre in which they occur reminds us both of our mortality and of our insignificance. They suggest a sense of scale. Timeless and eternal, they dwarf our petty diurnal dilemmas, making us aware of our humble place within the total scheme of things.

In *Eclipse*, Jeremy Podeswa's first feature film, there is much discussion about these matters. As people flock from around the world (supposedly to Toronto) to witness a total eclipse of the sun, many people have many things to say. "The total eclipse of the sun can make people feel extremely strange," says one. "A beam of darkness is being shone upon you," says another. "If you think of it that way, it's a reversal of nature." A professor pontificates with authority: "Eclipse comes from the Greek word for abandonment." Later on he declares that it's "like comparing a sunset to a thunderstorm. It overwhelms you with all the drama of all these natural phenomena. But it comes and suffuses you with some feeling for the world; and so it's irresistible, I think."

All these comments occur at different moments in this film as part of a video on the solar eclipse that Angelo, one of the characters, is preparing as a school exercise—probably for Ryerson! The colour video footage is intercut with (frequently tinted) black and white film footage of people courting, of people coupling—searching for sexual release, certainly, but also for love.

The structure of the film is thus that of a musical rondo. Indeed, it is in many ways a remake of Max Ophüls' classic adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's play, *La Ronde* (1950).

Although the couplings are often homosexual, the film does not address exclusively the mores of gay culture. Unlike the films of John Greyson, for instance, *Eclipse* is more about the problems of human loneliness and the universal search for the acceptance of love.

All the characters are orphans. They cruise through life in different protective garbs of a personalized self-construction, but they all live like exiles.

Some are actual exiles; for Podeswa interweaves his romantic longings with the intensified loneliness

of new Canadians. Sylvie (Pascale Monpetit), while technically a Canadian, hails from Sorel, from the outer reaches of Montréal. She is also an exile from her own incestuous family. Working as a live-in maid in a posh Toronto home, she is rogered by the husband, Brian (John Gilbert), who also cruises young men, and she is evidently longed for by Brian's wife. She herself seduces Gabriel (Manuel Aranguiz), a new Canadian from Chile who himself services Sarah, an upper-class woman from Venezuela (Maria del Mar), who has just become a mother and is uncertain of the depth of affection of her Canadian husband, Norman (Greg Ellwand), whom she met in South America. For his part, he is now uncertain whether he is straight or gay.

Norman's encounter with the beautiful young Angelo (Matthew Ferguson) provides the comedic centre of this film. Although Norman is shy and ill-at-ease, Angelo is totally open and accepting, enjoying his hotel encounters during the day, while returning to his parents' home at night. He has a similar trust and acceptance that the same actor displayed as the busboy in Denys Arcand's otherwise sterilized film, *Love and Human Remains*. For Angelo sex is no big deal. "It's just like any other recreational activity."

This playful assertion of affective independence, however, is not actually true. When Angelo visits the extravagant apartment of a sexual predator named Michael (Earl Pastko), he is not nearly so cool. On Michael's sofa is a cushion with "Welcome" on one side and "Fuck Off" on the other. Apparently some kind of performance artist, Michael keeps polaroids of all his exploits in little bottles with a note that details the length of each relationship. Indeed, the pervasive bric-à-brac is reminiscent of Père Jules' cabin in Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*, and his totally cynical attitude to relationships makes him more genuinely diabolical than the role that Pastko played in Bruce McDonald's *Highway 61*.

If the scene between Angelo and Norman provides the comedic centre of the film, the scene between Michael and Jim (Daniel MacIvor), his life-long friend, furnishes the compassionate centre. While for Michael, the intimacy that eventually takes place between them is just another fuck, Jim is moved to tears. Jim's inner loneliness is palpable and unbearable. For Michael, on the other hand, all of life is just a series of solitary moments, as if looking for perfection. It is the game of cruising—a game without significance.

What is extraordinary about Podeswa's film in

this day and age is its gentleness. Unlike the currently fashionable bragadocio of the work of Quentin Tarantino that metonymically celebrates the violent ejaculations of the American male, Podeswa investigates the actual uncertainty of (largely male) sexuality. Like his short film of a few years ago, *David Roche Talks To You About Love* (1983), *Eclipse* is full of nuanced compassion. Even the cynical Michael gains sympathy through the men who have wanted to love him; at the end of the film, as we witness the world undergoing a total eclipse of the sun, we see that several of the characters whom we have seen before have tears in their eyes.

What is the meaning, however, of the recurring references to the eclipse? Seeing the film at the Toronto International Film Festival last September, I heard suggestions that the references were gratuitous—perhaps pretentious. I disagree. While they remain ambiguous, they are teasingly provocative.

To begin with, such solar celebrations traditionally have implied terrestrial change and there is that sense of a cosmic shifting in this film. The social world is mutating, relationships are not what they were. As the sun emerges from behind the moon, the eclipse may be, indeed, about "coming out." At the same time, there is the contradictory sense that sexual ecstasy is both as rare and as ephemeral as a total eclipse of the sun. The "soft and sweet eclipse/when soul meets soul on lovers' lips" that Shelley celebrates and which Podeswa cites as epigraph to his film is itself rapidly eclipsed. But the solar eclipse is, finally, as the professor explains toward the end of the film, "a symbol of birth and renewal on the one hand and of eternal darkness on the other."

This dichotomy in Jeremy Podeswa's film, its search for love, is re-enforced no doubt by its homosexual bias—a form of love that, while capable of renewal, is never capable of birth. The pain of the longing for love is generalized, however, by Ernie Tollar's East Indian music that accompanies most of the stories, providing an Asian reference virtually devoid of diegetic placement for a film set in Toronto. Although there are some allusions to India at various moments in the film, as there are Japanese prints on the walls of the hotel room in which Angelo coaxes

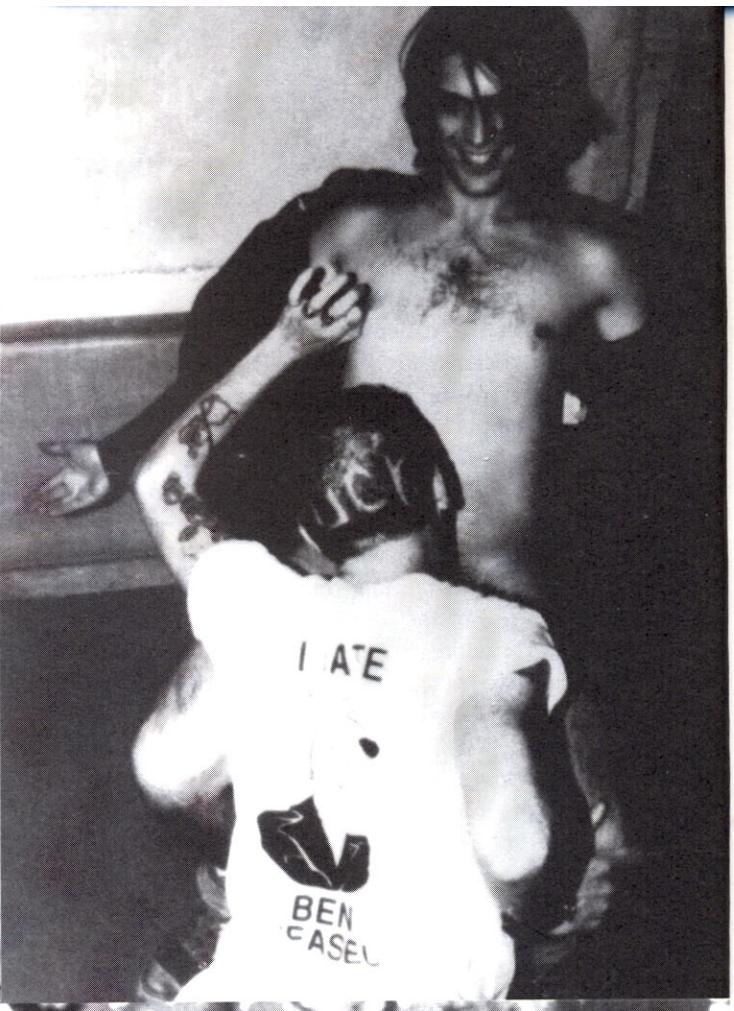


Norman into a different form of sexual self-expression, the fact that the music lacks the stability of cultural reference both universalizes the incidents and intensifies the pervasive feeling of exile in this film.

Eclipse further universalizes its representations by the formalized discretion of Miroslaw Baszak's cinematography. Although Norman is allowed a moment of swirling ecstasy after being brought out of the closet by the playful Angelo, for the most part the camera holds the characters at a distance, depicting their desire but withholding erotic passion.

Although perhaps a tinge misogynous, *Eclipse* is a wonderful first feature. It provides yet another indication that the creative imagination is alive and well in Toronto and is being supported, eventually, by the agencies set up to establish a film industry in this country. They are beginning to realize that the only films that are economically viable throughout the world are those that are, indeed, some form of cinematic art.

Within the difficult history of Canadian film production throughout the years, *Eclipse* helps me to believe that, like the sun emerging from the shadow of the moon in the closing image of this film, the light of funding may be emerging from the darkness, that the funding agencies themselves may, finally, be coming out.



Porn, Porosity and Promiscuity

The Recombinant Self and Industrialized Celebrity in

Super 8 1/2

by David McIntosh

"If art still remains the closet, let's make pornography." Bryan Bruce¹

"Somewhere along the line Bruce lost the ability to distinguish between movies and real life." Googie

"This is a true story, my story." Bruce LaBruce

"The truth is that very few people care. The reason is that the confusion of real life with 'role' life is now a fixture of business and politics as much as entertainment."²

Bruce LaBruce (invention, extension, subsidiary of Bryan Bruce, a reluctant intellectual and critic with a penchant for commodity theory, rebel sex, and 70's gay porn) has been central to Toronto's quercore scene for many years, producing the zine *J.D.'s*, making Super 8 films and generally testing the limits of attitude and fashion. Four years ago he achieved minor celebrity status in the international avant-garde underground set with his first no-budget feature film *No Skin Off My Ass*. In his new feature *Super 8 1/2: A Cautionary Bio-Pic*, LaBruce offers us his latest re-fashioning of self as Bruce LaBruce, fading porn star taken up and destroyed by post-modern critics, queer theorists and the exploitative lesbian art pornographer, Googie.

Demonstrating an expert understanding of and ability to manipulate the mechanisms for producing fame, LaBruce demystifies and defiles the celebrity industry while mythologizing himself within it. Cognizant of and

¹ Bryan Bruce, "Whipping It Up" in *CineAction*, Fall 87, p.44.

² Iain Mitroff and Warren Bennis, *The Unreality Industry*. Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 121.

addicted to the massive doses of unreality we all require simply to function, he has carefully constructed a closed system of queer history, a highly circumscribed map of the collective homo unconscious, built from relentless quotations from queer art, entertainment, camp and porn history. The narrative antecedents for *Super 8 1/2* are well known, well worn and comfortable: mass market pseudo-celebrity bio paperback trash like *Valley of the Dolls*, *Edie* and *A Low Life In High Heels*. The aesthetic approach is equally contained and referential, a nostalgic recreation of the 70's look of Andy Warhol and Fred Halstead films retrofitted with 80's punk fashions.

Within this closed system of industrialized celebrity, LaBruce has assumed complete control of his only resource — himself — and inserted his own factitious history — his “true story” — into the factory of fame, offering both his real life and his “role” life as the raw materials for exploitation in his own nascent cottage industry version of the manufacturing of a star, the only thing to be in a totalized simulacrous world. His many selves offered up for processing include: director, performer, narcissist, meat, fashion victim, bitch, and finally crazed object of humiliation. But as pointed out in Googie's quote, Bruce has no ability to distinguish between movies and reality; consequently, the most industrially exploitable quality of his self is its porousness and promiscuity.

In setting up a dynamic between a closed system of industrially produced consciousness and a porous self, LaBruce sets the ground for highlighting reality as an attribute of that dynamic. In this realm it is only authenticity, a lesser version of reality, which is, in fact a media product, that can be detected. The greater the confusion and blurring of boundaries between self and system, reality and movies, the greater the need for signs of authenticity. LaBruce utilises celebrity itself as a strategy of authenticity, including cameos by real film or TV personalities like Scott Thompson, Richard Kern and Vaginal Creme Davis. But his most important signifier of authenticity by far is pornography — hard core representations of cocksucking, ass fucking, piss drinking, fisting. Without the regular hardcore porn intervals, *Super 8 1/2* would just be another embarrassingly kitsch fashion and attitude exercise. Of all of our industrially exploitable selves, the eroticized meat self is the most authentic, the most renewable and the most liberating.

But despite the relative coterminousness of mediated sexual activity with the real queer self,

porn is still a self-sealing discourse, subject to the rules of the celebrity industry. To move beyond this hall of mirrors discourse in critical terms as LaBruce has done in cinematic terms in *Super 8 1/2* requires stepping outside standard theoretical approaches and moving more deeply into matters of sex and structure. One source of inspiration is writer Samuel Delaney's fictional autobiography (or perhaps autobiographical fiction) *The Mad Man*. Half philosophical murder mystery, half filthy (in the literal sense of the word) queer pornography, the novel traces the obsessions of a young PhD student with a passion for sucking off park winos. His major philosophical breakthrough is derived from and replicates his sexual practices:

“Large scale, messy, informal systems are necessary in order to develop, on top of them, precise, hard-edged, tractable systems ... structures that are so informal that it is questionable whether they can be called systematic at all are prerequisites for those structures that can be recognised as systems in the first place. The first three quarters of our century has been dominated by the unquestioned conviction that the world worked the other way around: that reality was built up of atomic perceptions, that language was built up from meanings and grammatical potentials associated with individual words... Clear and specific counting is basically a refinement of generalized, messy pointing, or even random flailing.”³

Structurally, *Super 8 1/2* is what Delaney calls a messy, informal system which falls within the category of the faux compilation film, built from a constantly shifting range of registers of address, including archival material, documentary interviews and voice-over commentary. It lays down a comprehensive, anarchic surface of mediated queer culture predicated on pornography and celebrity which is analogous to the random sex-starved and flailing approval-seeking behaviour (the lowest incarnation of celebrity urges) of many fags and dykes. This effervescent messy pointing seeks to evolve its own structures, systems and metaphors, to effect bottom up change, but LaBruce studiously avoids moral or sociological intentions, indicating instead that while sexual identity and porn might constitute an informal system of random flailing, they serve as the foundation on which the tractable industrial celebrity system has already been firmly

built. Or as Bruce states unequivocally, "Porn is the wave of the future."

New biological theory can help extend our analysis of construction of the porous self in less moral or sociologically constructive terms in that it conceives of the body not as unitary, "not one self, but a fiction of self built from a mass of interacting selves. A body's capacities are literally the result of what it incorporates; the self is not only corporal but corporate."⁴ If we shift to a less zoocentric corporal level to examine bacterial sex and structure, we discover that:

"Bacteria are omnisexual. Bacterial omnisexuality refers to the fluid genetic transfers, by definition sexual, among continuously reproducing bacteria. Bacteria are able to trade variable quantities of genes with virtually no regard for species barriers. Bacteria are so genetically promiscuous, their bodies are so genetically open, that the very concept of species falsifies their character as a unique life form."⁵

Considered from this perspective, the corporate LaBruce's mass of porous interacting selves are engaged in fluid and promiscuous sexual/intellectual transfers, absorbing, recombining and reproducing mutated strands of celebrity industry coding — best illustrated in a scene where he jerks off on a framed poster of David Cassidy. And analogous to survival rates of recombined bacteria, where billions of mutants expire instantaneously for every bacteria that flourishes so vigorously that it turns into flesh-eating disease, millions of mutant flash-in-the-pan celebrities are the evolutionary price paid for the stability of industrial celebrity system capable of throwing up a the rare mega-mutant on the order of Elizabeth Taylor or Andy Warhol.

The bacterial strategy of open-bodied disregard for unity of self as a reproductive method is also reflected in LaBruce's positioning of himself as the surface through which industrial celebrity vectors intersect, a strategy possibly best demonstrated in his explanation of the genesis of his films: "I steal all my lines. There's no copyright on good lines. When I used to direct my pornos, I'd steal titles, chunks of dialogue, entire plots. Everything came from other movies... Why? Because I'm busy. I have enough work to do without thinking up a new idea for every movie I make... even talking to myself is work." The virulence and thoroughness of his mutation is confirmed in a scene where he wakes up, turns on the TV and effortlessly voice-overs the lines of every Hollywood actress

on every channel. Even his demise at Googie's hands is genetically coded in celebrity fashion: "I was playing Edie to her Viva. The future was the bottom of the swimming pool. Grey Gardens awaited me."

LaBruce also constructs lists of queer references that operate like strands of genetic code, to be incorporated into a new species. In a segment where he considers gay celebrities who have died of AIDS, wondering if he'll be next, he recites a list which is akin to oral history but which is as deeply imbedded in us as DNA: "Fashion victims Halston, Perry Ellis, Willie Smith, all of the actors from *The Boys in the Band*... Denholm Elliot, Franklin Seals, Rock, Liberace, Keith Herring, Robert Reed, Mapplethorpe, Anthony Perkins, Roy Cohn, Nureyev, Freddie Mercury, Peter Allen, Foucault..." The list of his porn titles is also evidence of recombinant processes, with famous film titles recoded as queer: *I am Curious Gay*, *Pay Him as He Lays*, *Fugitive from a Gang Bang*, *Pretty in Porn*, *My Hustler-Myself*, *Ride Queer Ride*. And at the end of *Super 8 1/2*, as LaBruce's celebrity strategy fails and he is confined to a straightjacket, he offers us a tragic visual list, a recombinant strand of queer DNA, derived entirely from the preceding images: an archival sequence of stills of his many selves as they transform, reshape and recombine through their various porn roles.

True to his objectives articulated as Bryan Bruce over seven years ago, LaBruce has pried open the closet of art and given us an ultra-contemporary and hilarious porn fest. *Super 8 1/2* succeeds in resituating the complexities of porn and celebrity, sex and structure, real life and "role" life, and the recombinant self in a public space which is not coded exclusively as an art site or as a porn site, and in doing so maps a new territory of mediated queer space. However, despite the fact that *Super 8 1/2* packed houses at the Toronto International Film Festival and his appearance at screenings elicited squeals of recognition and anticipation, LaBruce's film will most likely not be readily accessible through conventional film distribution and exhibition means. Ironically, its intentionally crude production values and hardcore porn exile it from the commodity system it plays off, confining it to its sources in the art and porn underground.

³ Samuel Delaney, *The Mad Man*, Richard Kasak Books, NY, 1994, p.243.

⁴ Dorion Sagan, "Metametazoa: Biology and Multiplicity" in *Incorporations, Zone 6*. Urzone Inc, NY, 1992, p. 370.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 378.

All unreferenced quotes are from *Super 8 1/2*.

The aspect that always hits me the most powerfully is the silence imposed on women in the Arab-Muslim world. They grow up living in doubt as to their own existence and their own past.

Moufida Tlatli.

Moufida Tlatli, director of *Les Silences du Palais* (Tunisia, 1994), could be speaking not only of women of the Arab world, but of cinema as a cultural institution in the North African countries as well. The exceptions to this rubric are Egypt and Algeria. Algeria, which recognized the value of film in its struggle for independence, nationalized all sectors of the industry, not only maintaining a constant flow of indigenous production but also controlling the choice of subjects (with cycles on the liberation struggles in the 1960s and on agrarian reform in the 1970s). Egypt has a thriving indigenous popular film industry, self-sustaining within its own national boundaries.

The cinemas of the other North African countries, on the other hand, are circumscribed by the legacy of colonialism, the lack of indigenous industrial infrastructures (such as training facilities, labs, production facilities), the domination of the broadcast industry and commercial film distribution by foreign product, the failure of governments to initiate box-office surtaxes to foster production, and national markets too small to sustain a national cinema.

In 1970, in an effort to deal with the legacy of colonial domination at the cultural level, African filmmakers established their own professional organization, FEPACI (*Fédération pan-africaine des cinéastes*), uniting filmmakers from both the Arab North and sub-Saharan Africa and initiating festivals in Carthage, Tunis and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Since 1992 the Carthage annual event has also hosted an active market, which expects to sign distribution deals with fifty different territories in 1994 and hopes for a renewal of co-production as well.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts of individual filmmakers, private organizations and state bodies, African and Arab cinemas have not emerged as an industrial force on a global level. Filmmakers are far from possessing the market strength of the African or Arab musician; there are no millionaires among the ranks of the filmmakers, and outside the commercial film industry of Egypt, even a sustained rhythm of a feature film every four or five years is comparatively rare. Because of the constraints of budget and the difficulties of distribution, most African and Arab films are personal creations, the director acting as writer, producer, distributor, and sole promoter as well: if the film is screened abroad, the filmmaker will have to travel as the work's sole publicist, moving from festival to festival, doing deals with distributors, sales agents, and TV companies.

It may be argued that this is the fate of any independent filmmaker in any part of the world working outside the system. However, as Armes and Malkmus counter in *Arab and African Film Making* (1991), in much of Africa and the Arab world there is literally no system to work outside of: no production facilities or sources of finance, no pool of experienced technicians, a comparatively brief tradition of filmmaking and a local market so unregulated that recoupment through box office is virtually impossible. Arab and African films therefore represent an awesome personal effort on the part of their makers, whose rewards normally are severely limited. As in our own colonial industry in Canada, African cinema is marked as a result by the first-film syndrome; many newcomers of real talent never get the chance to make a second feature. In Tunisia the state organization historically took a more forceful role, controlling the import of films and participating in the production of a considerable number of features (including some disastrous French co-productions), despite a crippling burden of debt stemming from a costly but initially underequipped studio complex at Gammart.

For Tunisian women, however, the colonial constraints are doubled and redoubled. As Tahar Chikhaoui has written, "The best known of the paradoxes of the cinema is that it has



Les Silences du Palais



By Kay Armatage

made woman a prey of the camera much more easily than if she had gone behind it. The cinema of Tunisia has not escaped this sad truth. If Haydee Chikly had her first role in 1922 in a short film, *Zohra*, made by her father, we had to wait until 1975, that is twenty years after Independence and ten years after the first Tunisian feature film, to see a Tunisian woman obtain the status of director."

And as Moufida Tlatli has said, "The heroine of my story is a woman, the type that in our countries is sometimes said to be 'colonized by the colonized,' a woman inferior by birth, a woman born to serve man....At the time of the protectorate, men were trapped by the colonizers and they tended to reproduce this model and this oppression....[Even in modern Tunisia] the burdens of tradition continue to play very important political, social, family and religious roles....Women are ready for the choice of modernity, but are men?"

The few women filmmakers in Tunisia have tended to come from the ranks of actors, editors or producers. Selma Baccar, Nejia Ben Mabrouk and Moufida Tlatli are the only women in Tunisia to have made feature films in the thirty years of its industry, which has produced over fifty features.

Like many of the African directors, Selma Baccar went to film school in Paris in 1968. She worked as an A.D. in Tunisian TV from 1970, and made *Fatma 75*, a docudrama in five episodes, describing the major historical phases of Tunisian women's emancipation in strongly militant tones. For many years the film was banned because the Secretariat of State for Information had deemed certain scenes, particularly those on sex education in schools, unacceptable. Baccar finally won the *Ducat d'or* prize of the Mannheim Festival in 1979, but *Fatma 75* has had no broad distribution since. Baccar continued her career in television, working as assistant producer, executive producer and director of production, in addition to making five short films between 1968 and 1990. Her second feature, *Habiba Msika*, based on the life of a great star of Tunisian song and theatre, was completed just in time for the Carthage Film Festival (November 1994).

Nejia Ben Mabrouk's *La Trace* (1985) belongs to another vein of Tunisian cinema which appeared in the 1980s - less overtly militant, more personal, and verging on the autobiographical. *La Trace* tells the story of a young girl from a working-class background in the south of Tunisia. Getting ready to leave for Tunis to continue her studies, the girl remembers her childhood in a hard and masculine

society, and honours her mother for courageously defying her father to insist on the daughter's right to education. Another victim of the first-feature syndrome, Nejia Ben Mabrouk has directed only once since then, a short episode in *La guerre du Golfe et apres?* in 1992.

Born in Sidi Bou-Said, Moufida Tlatli is a contemporary of Selma Baccar's, graduating from the Paris film school, Idhec, in 1968. Between 1968 and 1972 she worked as a script supervisor and then production manager in French TV, quickly rising in the Tunisian film industry as one of the most sought-after editors. Since 1972 she has edited many feature films including *Omar Gatlato* by Merzak Allouache, *Nahal* by Farouk Beloufa, *La memoire fertile* by Michel Khleifi, *L'ombre de la terre* by Taieb Louhichi, *Traversees* by Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud, *Les baliseurs du desert* by Nacer Khemir, and *Halfaouine* by Ferid Boughedir. Her association with Boughedir, not only one of Tunisia's most respected film directors but also an historian of Arab and African cinema, has afforded Tlatli a firm grounding in the narrative traditions of Arab film-making. Her twenty-year career as an editor also situated her in the centre of Tunisian film circles, enabling her to form a crew of exceptional quality for her first feature.

As *Les Silences du palais* begins, Alia is twenty-five and a small-time professional singer. After the humiliations of the umpteenth wedding gig, she revolts against her life and her lover of ten years. The announcement of the death of Prince Sid'Ali, in whose house she was raised, plunges her into her past. As she revisits the deserted palace, now silent and delapidated, the memories of her girlhood flood back. Moving from one setting to another - the gate, the courtyard, the gazebo, the basement hideout where she met her lover - she recalls the scenes that took place there and begins to piece together not only her own life but her mother's and grandmother's as well.

In the world of Oriental princes—the last of whom reigned in Tunisia—servants are subject to the corvée, the "droit du seigneur," to have sex with the palace servants. As Alia recovers the past, she unravels the mystery of her mother's sexual servitude and her own birth, as well as the psychological ramifications of sexual and colonial cuissage.

The story is told with a suggestive delicacy of tone and rhythm which undercuts the militancy of the narrative. The film is shot (by Youssef Ben Youssef) with a dappled beauty, which richly evokes both the bygone splendours of the palace and its

present decay. Measured and graceful in its editing (by Tlatli), the narrative proceeds in an associative pattern of past and present, the flashbacks evoked by spatial references.

Far from silent, the lives of the women who are virtually imprisoned in the palace are rendered with loving attention to the details of their work and to the political realities which they survive with courage, comradeship, and the resources of their bodies. The film rings with constant conversation, laughter and music as the women carry out the duties of the household.

The "silences" of the film's multivalent title are not just those of the now-empty spaces of the palace, however. One gnawing silence for Alia is her mother's refusal to reveal the identity of her father, and the older women counsel Alia to still her voice and her curiosity. But Alia learns to sing: by turning to the talents of her own body, Alia finds the strength to refuse her expected destiny of domestic, sexual and political servitude. When she publically breaks silence by singing the revolutionary anthem of Tunisian Independence at a palace party, she forges a new life and new consciousness for herself.

Yet as the fragmented narrative unfolds, the past overlapping and recolouring the present, Alia also reflects on the current status of women in Tunisian urban culture. Her lover, once a revolutionary in the struggle for independence, has devolved into an uncaring contemporary husband, living off the profits of Alia's career as a club singer and maintaining her fading specular status as desirable object by insisting on repeated abortions. Alia's militancy is the result of this shock of the new; it lifts the film out of the category of the traditional oriental tale into a doubled significance: political and personal, historical and contemporary.

The film and Tlatli are enjoying the fruits of the international festival circuit since it has won the respected *Camera d'or* for best first feature at Cannes and the FIPRESCI international critic's award at the Toronto Film Festival (September 1994). Now there is also a possibility of a wider release on the art-house circuit: *Les Silences du palais* is being handled for world sales by Fortissimo, an astute, politically committed and respected Amsterdam independent, and for American distribution by Zeitgeist, a discerning small company which has had considerable success with niche marketing of films by Yvonne Rainer, Todd Haines, Atom Egoyan and Derek Jarman.

The final words must belong to Moufida Tlatli:

We have to change and shake up the ways of thinking. As a filmmaker, I try to do that and contribute my own stone. Probably in Tunisia we are the most privileged of all Arab women, but a lot remains to be done and we have to think of all our sisters with solidarity. In my film, through an individual fate, I have tried to deal with the fate of the women of the Arab world. I repeat, there is a gap at present between the emancipation of women and that of men, a distortion between theory and practice, between tradition and modernity. Laws exist but can they remove mental blocks?...I believe that cinema can, in its own way, help to change things. A new Tunisian cinema exists and is dealing with questions of society more freely. That makes me doubly confident and ready to fight, as a woman and as a filmmaker, so that the silence stops and justice and equality reign amongst human beings, whatever their sex or race.

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NARMADA: *A Valley Rises*



by Gabrielle Hezekiah



The Narmada Valley in India is home to thousands and cradle of the sacred Narmada river. Among the most fertile land in Asia for centuries it has sustained its indigenous people, the *adivasis* (more specifically, the Bhils and Bhilalas), in the mountain regions, and nonindigenous people on the plains. Since 1985 the lives of the people of the Valley have been threatened by the construction of the Sarvar Sarvoda dam in the state of Gujarat. The dam will span three states - Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Through a system of canals it is intended to service the drought-stricken districts of northern Gujarat. But the dam will flood the homes and lands of the people of the Valley and the people have not been consulted. It is unclear if those who need the water most will be the first to benefit. More than half a million people will be displaced, and no adequate plans have been made for resettlement. Traditional ways of life and communities will be broken. In December 1990 over 3000 people meet at the banks of the Narmada river to take an oath "to save our lives and the lives of our future generations, our culture and our nature." A historic march is planned to Gujarat, where the first phase of the dam is being built. The march will follow the strategies of Gandhi's famous Salt March of 1931. It is here that filmmaker Ali Kazimi picks up the story.

Narmada: A Valley Rises is a dramatic narrative replete with conflict, obstacles, key protagonists, deep emotions, plot twists, negotiations and strategy. Shot on professional Hi-8 with a crew of three, this film follows the struggles of the Save Narmada Movement along a nonviolent march to the state of Gujarat, where protesters demand an immediate government review of the Sarvar Sarvoda project and the cessation of work on the dam while the review takes place. The Indian government refuses to contemplate a review. The protesters are stopped at the Gujarat border and prevented from entering the "prohibited zone." They are met by pro-dam supporters, police and undercover intelligence officers, and an impasse results. The government uses physical violence and psychological tactics to break the will of the protesters. Officials of the state of Gujarat visit an ailing leader of the movement, as concern for his health deepens. Still, no resolution is in sight, and the decision is made to embark upon an indefinite hunger strike. After twenty-two days word arrives that the World Bank, one of the funders of the project, will conduct a review. The government has not backed down. The hunger strike ends and the struggle continues. This story was captured in eighty hours of tape and whittled down to a mere eighty-seven minutes of powerful dramatic documentary.

From the outset Kazimi locates himself (as an Indian-born filmmaker), his film and the Narmada river and valley. Long establishing shots construct a timeless frame for the valley. The first figure onscreen is a woman, who describes the way in which the Narmada river and its valley have allowed her and other valley dwellers to be self-sufficient. Throughout the film there are interviews with leaders and "ordinary people." An unnamed indigenous man also appears before the key public figures in the movement—thirty-five year old social activist Medha Patkar, seventy-six year old activist and spiritual leader Baba Amte. He declares that the land belongs to the "tribal" people. This is typical of Kazimi's approach. Although in true dramatic style the film is indeed about the "stars," Kazimi is able to make spaces for the voices of "ordinary" people in the movement to be heard. By focussing on local experts such as environmentalist Ashish Kotari and Dr. B.D. Sharma, Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, he develops the sense of an internally developed analysis and politics, which can then be supported by those outside of India.

By the time Medha Patkar has been introduced and her politics of action and close involvement with the people has been established, the basis of the story has been laid. This will be a film about indigenous rights as human rights, development and modern-

ization, gender in collective struggle, and who has the right to define the "best interests" of the nation. The "real story" begins when the thousands of valley inhabitants meet at the banks of the river to take their oath, encapsulating the basic struggles in the film. This is a struggle over culture, nature, life and death.

From this point on movement is the central concept, symbolized in the extraordinary shot of feet walking along the road, the anticipation of movement and the inability to move. The marchers trek to Gujarat, where they are confronted by pro-dam supporters and official state intervention. Boundaries are erected and maintained in ways which clearly draw the lines of power and state. (Patkar later remarks that the boundary line has come to symbolize the line between development and destruction.) The mass movement of people is stopped. It is here that the confrontation comes to a head. Beatings and kidnappings occur at night, Baba Amte's condition deteriorates, causing concern on both sides. The depiction of walking to the line and being held back further dramatizes the tension. All of this - all the scenes of Act II - take place in the same physical location, without the possibility of movement. The emotional and political impasse is concretized in the inability to move physically beyond borders.

National concepts are paramount in this feature, as Baba Amte later pleads with his opponents to enter into a democratic debate to settle these national questions. The tenuousness and arbitrariness of the nation is brought to the fore by Amit Bhatnagar, an activist in the movement. The major cities and seats of economic power and industrialization constitute the nation. Those who deplete fewer resources and are able to sustain themselves in more energy and cost efficient ways are denied a voice, their needs sacrificed to "wider interests."

The force displayed at the border is further emphasized in the agonizing moments when Medha Patkar is confined behind the lines of battle (the activists fear that her arrest at this stage would be detrimental to the movement) as Baba Amte and others move forward. This is one of the most riveting scenes. By moving between these two scenes, Ali Kazimi portrays, in a few seconds, the isolation and the comradeship that inevitably are part of a struggle of this nature. The battle is fought on all fronts and is as profoundly spiritual, reflective and personal as it is communal, physical and combative. The principles of nonviolence adopted by the protesters do not in any way neutralize the overall violence of the context, and it is this reality that the film is able to

capture so well. It is also the inside/outside position of director and cinematographer Kazimi that allows the camera to represent, juxtapose and move between these images in a context where all other movement has ground to a halt.

The decision to place women on the frontline of the struggle is made after it becomes clear that this tactic is being used by the other side. But women have always been there. They push the men to consider whether they themselves are truly prepared to engage in nonviolent action in the face of inevitable violence. They willingly participate at all levels of the struggle. And others have come to offer their experiences (at Bhopal, among other places) in solidarity.

The last phase of this epic is marked by the decision that a few of the activists, including Medha Patkar, will embark on an indefinite hunger strike. It is a difficult decision, as it places pressure on both sides of the struggle. It is also a vulnerable position, and Kazimi is able to follow it closely and respectfully. When the hunger strike is called off, we are reminded that the struggle continues and that lives continue to be lost.

Narmada: A Valley Rises is clearly situated on the side of the people of the Valley, who struggle for sustainable development. It makes no apologies for that fact. It points to the role of local and international capital in the modernization process, and in the definition of what it means to "modernize." It documents a movement that has brought people together across religious, geographical, social divisions and ethnicity - on both sides of the issue. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement) earned the 1991 Right Livelihood Award, known as the "Alternative Nobel Prize," and Medha Patkar was awarded one of the 1992 Goldman Environmental Prizes. Protests in solidarity with the opposition movement were staged in Tokyo, London and Washington, D.C., and the Japanese government withdrew its funding for the project.

In an age when lived struggle might seem outdated, Ali Kazimi reminds us of what political documentary might look like, reminding us that political documentary can offer both good filmmaking and exquisite cinematography. It is not easy to earn the kind of trust that will allow a filmmaker to capture the most intimate moments of personal and collective struggle. Ali Kazimi makes it look easy and painful, and because of this he has produced a powerful documentary.



Fresh Kill

By Laura U. Marks

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY IS HIP, ACCORDING to Shu Lea Cheang's first feature film, *Fresh Kill* (1994). Keep it small, democratic, and close to home—like a shantytown, like community-access TV, like a recycling business—or it'll wash up on your shores and seep into your food and pollute your airwaves when you least expect it.

Without trying too hard, *Fresh Kill* shows the contradiction between the not-in-my-backyard approach to environmental pollution and the globalizing interests of multinational corporations. The film's plot turns on radioactive fish. Most of the action is set on Staten Island, far enough away from Manhattan to be ignored, but close enough to have

the largest garbage dump in the world. Far enough away to be utterly forgotten are the dump sites in Africa, where U.S. corporations and states pay negligible sums for the privilege of burying their toxic waste. Cheang also pulls in references to Orchid Island, Taiwan's nuclear dump site in the Pacific, where three thousand Aboriginal people live. A haunting moment in *Fresh Kill* is when poet Miguel Flores (Jose Zuniga) hallucinates the story of an unnamed village that received a gift of giant drums, which foreign soldiers bury in the field. At night, a breathtaking, powdery mist rises from ground. The villagers think it's a sign from the spirits and rub the powder on themselves. "Mothers bless their sleeping

infants with it. The young, the old, all take part in this joyous celebration." By sunrise, they are all dead.

But pollution is global—right? In the film, a news flash reports that a U.S. hydrogen bomb that was lost during World War Two has been leaking toxic radioactive material. It's not until cats and sushi-eating yuppies start turning neon green and talking strangely that the implications hit home. The toxic fish get turned into cat food, and into the exotic fish-lip sushi served at the Naga Saki restaurant.

Fresh Kill's central characters are the lovers Shareen Lightfoot, played by the luminous Sarita Choudhury, and Claire Mayakovsky, played by Erin McMurtry (whose beautiful and troubled face reminded me of Renée Falconetti as Joan of Arc). Shareen has a furniture-reclamation business; Claire is a waitress and moonlighting accordionist. Their impish daughter Honey is played by the angelic Nelini Stamp.

These women are not the wan babes of *Go Fish*. And *Fresh Kill* refuses to let itself be slotted as a "lesbian chic" film. Cheang points out that the film, scripted by Jessica Hagedorn, was in planning stages long before this latest marketing niche was dug; but, she says, many festivals want to bill *Fresh Kill* primarily as a lesbian film. Cheang is a marvelous director of erotic scenes, as her luscious short videos with Jane Castle and Ela Troyano, *Sex Fish* and *Sex Ball*, attest. Scenes between Shareen and Claire, and between Claire's brother and his lover in a bathtub, are steamy, rough, beautifully shot—and funny, as when Claire resuscitates her own squeeze box while Shareen brings her off. But these two have a lot more issues to concern themselves with than their sexuality, such as corporate takeovers, environmental pollution, public-access television, their daughter's mysterious disappearance, and Shareen's furniture reclamation business. Sex is a break from these other traumas, not a source of trauma.

Fresh Kill's casting is designed to perplex ethnic categories. Shareen, played by the South Asian Choudhury, has a dad played by native actor Rino Thunder, and her brother is East Asian. Claire's mom, Mimi (Laurie Carlos), is African American; Claire is white. Shareen and Claire's daughter, Honey, is black. This masala of characters gives the edge to color-blind casting. Most of the bad guys are still white.

Though this is Cheang's first feature, she has a record of remarkably complex collaborative projects, such as the multimedia installations *Color Schemes* (1990) and *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire* (1992).

The issues that catapult around *Fresh Kill* are also long-term interests of Cheang's: media control and media access (*Making News/Making History: Live from Tiananmen Square*, 1989), environmental pollution (*The Airwaves Project*, 1991), and interracial relationships (*Those Fluttering Objects*). Like her other projects, *Fresh Kill* includes a lot of media activists, such as DeeDee Halleck and Shari Frilot, on its staff, and features a large cast from the downtown (downtown New York, that is) art/performance scene. Robbie McCauley, Karen Finley, Jimmie Durham, Jessica Hagedorn, Ron Vawter and others bring their own light-absorbing presences onto the already crowded set, creating an atmosphere of exuberant near-anarchy. A score by Vernon Reid, at turns nervous, playful and searing, filters through it all. It sounds especially good during scenes shot on the Staten Island Ferry under a blood-red sky.

Fresh Kill's coalition-style production is matched by the loose coalition politics of the story. The film's protagonists are a disparate crew of artists and street survivors. They coalesce fleetingly in a pool hall and a high-concept shanty town. The real connections get made, (surprise!) thanks to alternative media networks: public access television and the (still affordable and accessible) Net. There's also a bow to the role artist-run centers play in the alternative information network, when somebody conspicuously posts a flyer for the Downtown Community Television Center on a "Post No Bills" wall in the background of one scene. Much of the plot gets pushed along thanks to that new bastion of free-form democracy, a public access show, hosted by Claire's mother, Mimi. "Yours Truly Mimi" recalls the vigilante television of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*—a tough (but this time also charming) African-American woman addresses the camera with urgency, with a fierce cast of women backing her up. Issues are held together by the glue of Mimi's energy and charm, as when one guest (played by Finley) insists that Staten Island secede from New York City, while simultaneously another (McCauley), equally vociferously, demonstrates condom use on dozens of colorful vegetables. Another day the Bird Watch Society is a guest in the studio: a posse of women armed with binoculars, who monitor changes in Staten Island wildlife with awful precision. It is on Mimi's show that the connections are made between disappearing and/or radioactive cats and the GX corporation.

On the Net, Jiannbin Liu (Abe Lim), Claire's



hacker brother, manages to break in to GX's files. And it is also during his cyber-watch that the African Unity Network breaks into the electronic networks, with its warning to "Stop Dumping in Africa." The vigilante organization ultimately takes an American hostage, live on the Net, to compel U.S.-based toxic exporters.

The evil GX corporation is behind the contaminated cat food. Some of the best visuals in the film are GX's television ads. "We Care" is GX's creepy slogan, stated over ominous music. The GX logo appears from a close-up on the gesturing hands of a corporate exec (the sort of image that's supposed to demonstrate how human they are), then spins into space, superimposed on a satellite high above the blue earth. Through the course of the film these ads are followed by slogans that appropriate ACT-UP's powerful slogan to a Brave New World logic: "Energy = Power," "Power = Security," "Security = Control," "Control = Freedom," "Freedom = Interest," "Interest = Progress," "Progress = Green," "Green=Greed."

These ads are trenchant satires of multinationals that obliterate their ever more obscure global financial dealings behind bland slogans. GX's logo looks suspiciously like that of General Electric—or GE, as the corporation prefers to call itself now—whose motto states, "We bring good things to light." Or consider the evolution from specificity to generality that characterizes Standard Oil's metamorphosis to Esso, then (in the U.S.) to the bland but powerful Exxon, or 3M's humble origins as Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing. GX's untroubled trading in futures from cat food to satellites is a study in corporate abstraction.

The source of the radioactive kitties is GX's Sea Wonder cat food, whose ads feature a tangoing feline couple. In a feat of corporate morphing, when Sea Wonder gets pulled off the shelves, GX immediately begins marketing EcoCat. EcoCat's television promo shows a scrubbed kitty grinning as mung beans and carrots fly into a cat food tin. At around the same time, Naga Saki changes its name to Mumbo Gumbo and starts serving 100 percent toxin-free fried catfish.

Plot is secondary to production in *Fresh Kill*. It's tempting to think that the inspiration for the radioactive-cat plot was design consultant Patrick Nagatani's famous installations of rooms swarming with neon-colored animals. The environmentalist and anti-capitalist points are made in passing, between stylish vignettes, manufactured television programs, and about a zillion cameo performances. *Fresh Kill* was funded by the Independent Television Service, Channel 4, and Woo Art International. The former two explain the film's television look: cinematographer Jane Castle uses lots of medium shots, interiors, and big splashes of color, in addition to the film's numerous slams at the medium.

Fresh Kill is promoted as "an eco-cybernoia film about a channel-switching culture." I wished some of the plot points were made a little more insistently, but in general it was easy to accept that *Fresh Kill* is not about cohesion. Cheang's work has always been about pulling together a group of diverse talents, bringing a degree of fusion to the resulting art-activism salad without effacing their individual qualities. *Fresh Kill* is definitely a salad, not a stew—and it's not sushi either.

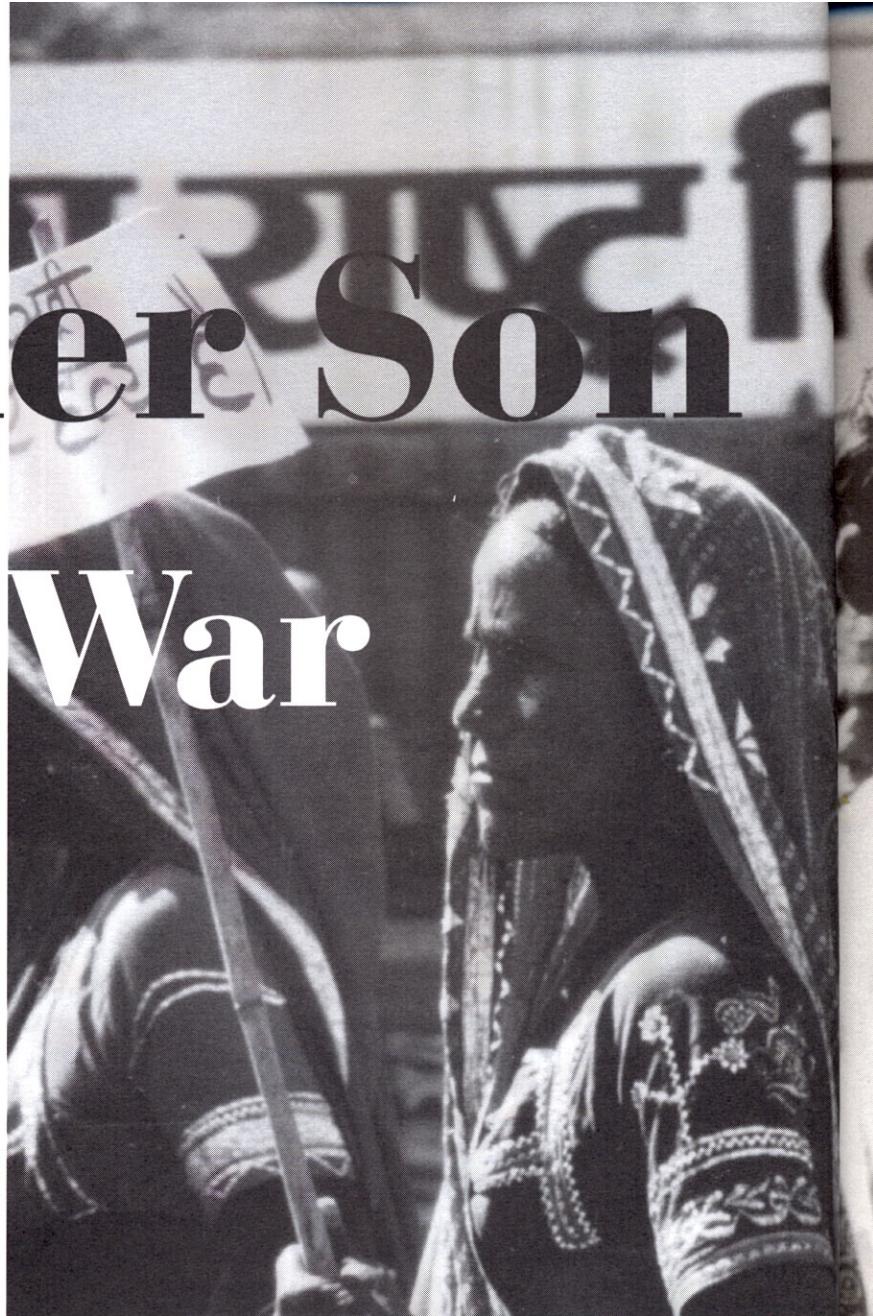
Anand
Patwardhan's

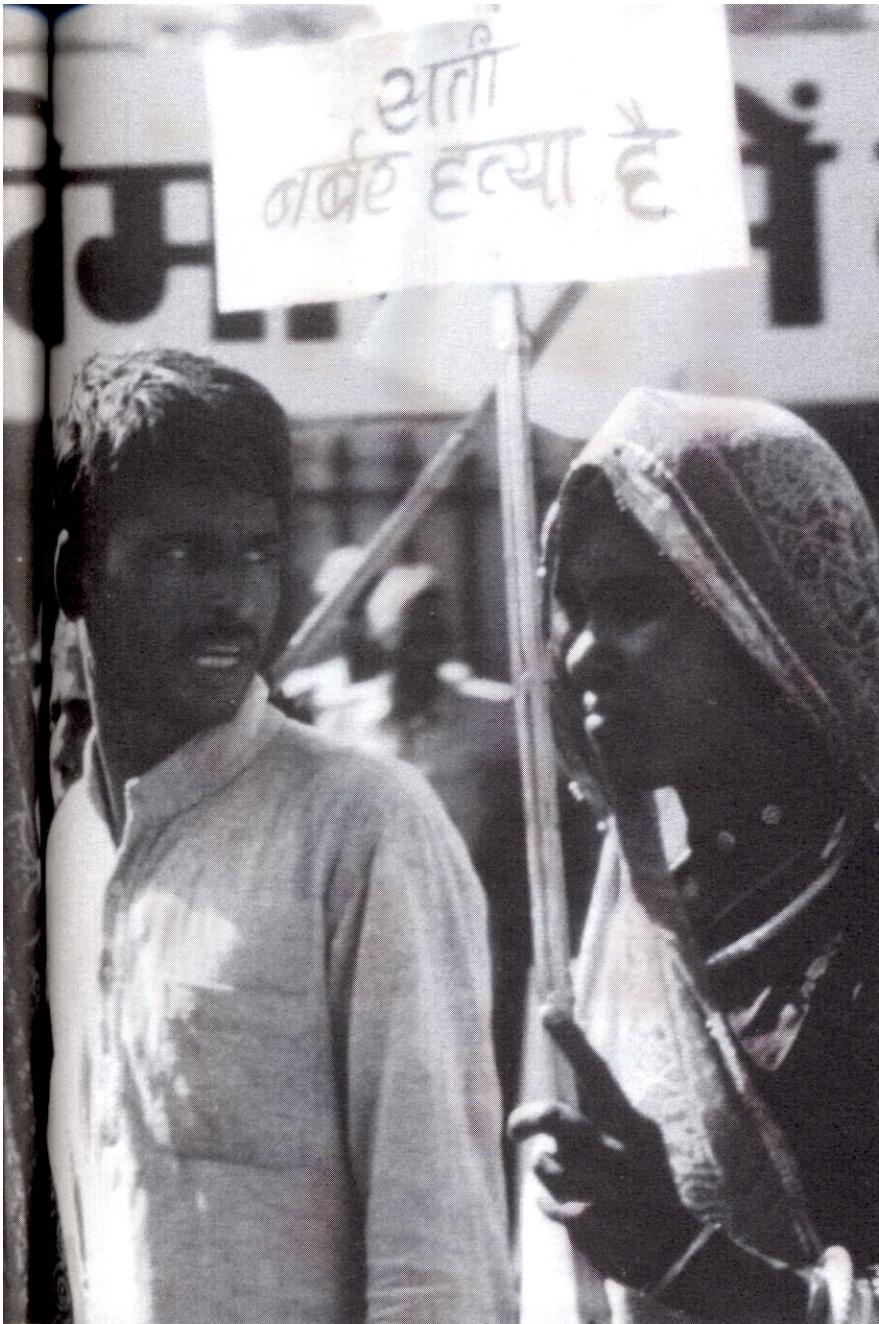
Father Son and Holy War

One of the many unsettling moments in Anand Patwardhan's latest feature documentary *Father Son and Holy War* shows a female adherent to the doctrine of *sati* holding a picture of this ritual act of widow immolation. A cartoonish Hindu deity in the clouds sends his beams down to a collage of clumsily painted flames consuming a photo of the ritual's smiling victim, a young Rajput widow named Roop Kanwar, burned in 1987. The interviewer suggests that the picture might be "faked," but the middle-aged housewife clings to her visual "proof" of the divine ordination of the fiery self-sacrifice. Though she is humbler and less media savvy than her equally literal-minded Canadian counterparts, REAL Women, she too is an agent, not only in a religious quarrel, but in a larger political war.

This power struggle around gender, sexuality and the body may have an economic base and the entire democratic secular organization of society as its target, but it is shaped by religious fundamentalism, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh, and has grown increasingly virulent in India, as everywhere else, since the early eighties. Patwardhan has devoted a prize-winning series of feature-length documentaries to the war, *In Memory of Friends* (1990, on the Punjab crisis), and *In the Name of God* (1992), on the build up of Hindu electoral extremism that eventually led to the 1993 demolition of the Ayodhya mosque and the communal holocaust that followed. *Father, Son and Holy War*, Patwardhan's latest instalment (1994), probes the defensive orchestration of masculinity in the context of politico-religious conflict, offering a feminist slant on the legacy of hatred.

The naive *sati* collage is one of many images framed within Patwardhan's film. There are numerous pictures of women, of course: glamorous movie stars posing as eroticized rape victims on the gigantic billboards that are an omnipresent urban backdrop; a gyrating mechanical sex-star that spearheads a Hindu far-right elec-





by
Thomas Waugh

toral campaign; clips of *The Ramayana*, the hugely popular TV adaptation of the Hindu epic showing the goddess Sita submitting to the ordeal by fire ordered by her husband Lord Rama; framing them all, a heavy-breasted fertility figure from an ancient Indus valley civilization, which embodies for Patwardhan the matriarchal communal tradition abandoned by modern society.

But the male images are no doubt more startling to Western viewers, for whom *Gandhi* remains the prevailing repository of stereotype: the billboards

conjure up rows of Uzi-toting Rambo-imitations, and the magazines are full of pale-skinned, happy and plump boy babies; new satellites beam down the grotesque posturing of American wrestling star "Macho Man," who actually shows up in Bombay to the screams of boy fans. Meanwhile the fertility goddesses have long since yielded to phallic *lingam* idols that are venerated throughout the land.

Thus an image epic about a war of images, *Father* is perhaps Patwardhan's most self-reflexive film. It exposes not only the political valences of images but their autonomous cultural operations within systems of belief, fear and desire as well. But Patwardhan is not caught up in the sceptical postmodernism of recent Western documentary à la Errol Morris or Chris Marker, in which all images are opaque facets of the simulacrum with no special access to "truth" or "the real." In some ways Patwardhan's fluid and interactive "direct cinema" approach is every bit as trusting in the evidentiary power of the documentary image as the stubborn faith of his *sati* devotee. Intercut with the visual flotsam of contemporary Indian culture are the sober realist tropes that we have come to recognize as Patwardhan hallmarks. Amid the cacophonous inferno of Indian cities, he tracks down, prods and records quiet acts of resistance. Some are private and solitary: an illiterate woman trustingly opens her home to an interview and speaks out the hope and courage of the poor.

More often resistance is familiarly public and collective. The current series has highlighted the menace inherent in groups, the way young men and teenagers inflame each others' fanaticism and bravado, pushing at or confronting the camera. The soundtrack even includes young male voices bragging of arson and of masturbating to rape movies. Yet Patwardhan maintains everywhere his classic sense of the nurturance and solidarity of the group as well: for example, the orderly demonstrations of sari-clad protesters or the punchy songs of an agit-prop troupe braving the shantytowns of Bombay. Again and again women come together—sometimes without identifying ethnic markers, a favourite strategy from way back for this artist of reconciliation—gathering to bewail for the camera the devastation of sectarian, male violence, and helping each other pick up the pieces. Like the *sati* proponent, Anand believes because he wants to believe, but he always finds documentary imprints of the real world to support that belief: the closing images are of Hindus and Muslims rebuilding their dwellings side by side (a haunting flashback to *Bombay Our City*, Patwardhan's great film on the housing crisis in Bombay, now over a decade old).

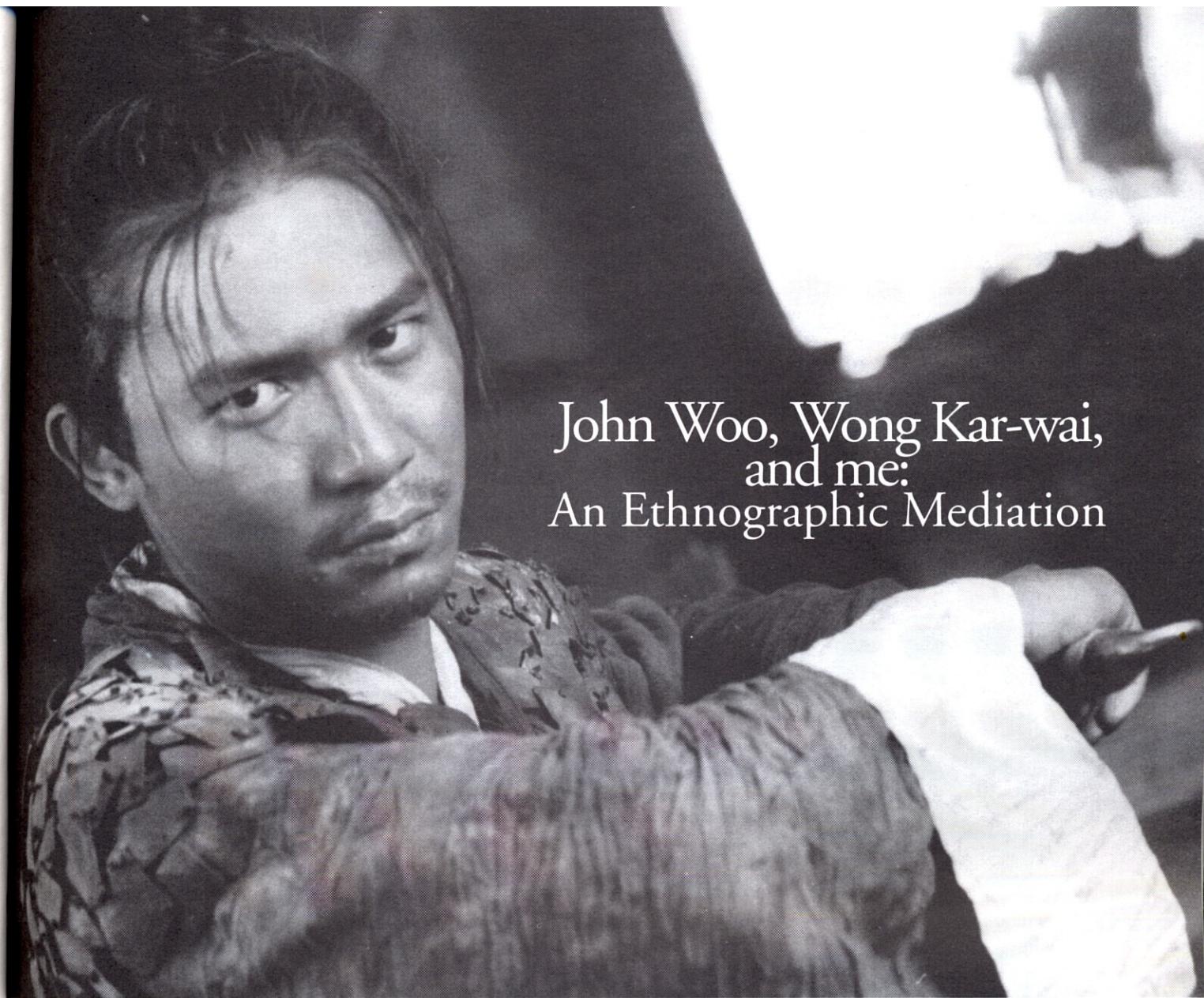
Part I of *Father*, "Trial by Fire," focuses on the flames of both *sati* and the sectarian violence that followed Ayodhya. The second part, "Hero Pharmacy," delves into material that may seem less familiar, the various cults of defensive male socialization fermenting within Indian popular culture and politics. From the natalist demagoguery of both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalisms, whipped up by everything from circumcision jokes to bodybuilding contests, we pass to the street-level hawking of elixirs for thickening your semen and enhancing your erection. In the contradictory messages of a society that markets rape imagery and at the same time warns you "your cylinder will drop like a bunch of bananas," the parallels with our own erotophobic and misogynist society are vivid.

There are a number of fine, independent Indian documentaries on *sati*, communal violence, and gender politics, but *Father* is the first to try to stitch them together in such a comprehensive manner. *Father*'s two parts hang loosely together, an advantage for the evident strategy of circulating them separately or together. Overall, however, they lack the narrative surge of *In the Name of God*, the strongest entrant of Patwardhan's trilogy. Perhaps *Father* tries to be too encyclopedic, perhaps tries too

hard to impose its simplified feminist grid on a problematic whose complexity overwhelms abstraction. Visually too, *Father*, which finally brings Patwardhan back to his steamy, sprawling home town, may lack for some viewers the coherence or clarity of *In the Name of God*, with its dusty and ochre palette of the rural roads and villages of Uttar Pradesh. On the other hand, it may be that the Bombay jungle is too close to home, not only for Patwardhan, but also for the North American viewer, with its vibrations of the South Central L.A. flames or of the Reform Party demagoguery, with the result that the comfortable aesthetics and aestheticizations of the exotic are no longer allowed.

By stressing such points of access for Western viewers, I do not mean to imply that Patwardhan's main constituency is abroad. The filmmaker sets up many East-West parallels to provide a cross-cultural gloss on patriarchal violence—how could he do otherwise in the face of the global trade in weapons and weapons movies? Nevertheless, Patwardhan shrugs off any priority for foreign audiences. It is true that diasporic and solidarity constituencies abroad have been an important mainstay for him, financial, technical and moral, ever since his days of exile during Indira Gandhi's "Emergency" dictatorship almost two decades ago. Yet he has become increasingly skilled over the years in reaching his domestic viewers, with tactics ranging from litigation, to forcing his way onto the state network, to sophisticated mass mailings of video cassettes in various language versions through existing networks.

Festival venues in the West are no doubt important refuelling stops for the filmmaker and festival audiences alike, especially with alternative distributors and venues closing up shop all the time. But festivals are also part of the problem insofar as they become exclusive ghettos for documentary films from India and other postcolonial cultures, indeed for all alternative cinema. Encouraging as Patwardhan's success has been at the Toronto and Vancouver festivals (*Father* won an important jury prize at the latter), can festivals really satisfy our urgent need to connect with this work and its world—or more importantly the need of the traditional documentary constituencies of alternative, educational and community audiences? Male violence yes, but how can the deliberate vision of a realist artist committed to the affect and effect of rebuilding burnt out dwellings not get blown away by *Pulp Fiction*?



John Woo, Wong Kar-wai, and me: An Ethnographic Mediation

by
Susan Morrison

I

Unlike past festivals, where the arrival of certain films has been eagerly awaited, it seemed that this year there was much less pre-festival anticipation. In fact, the most heavily publicized /anticipated films of the fall season, *Natural-Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction*, were not even in the festival. NBK was released before it began, and PF at least several weeks later. This countered the trends of past festivals where the big American "fall release" films opened, complete with stars and directors in attendance. These factors, together with the frustrating situation that many films sold out before the press tickets went on sale, meant that more "blind" experimentation was encouraged with regards to film selection.

At any rate, I ended up on the last days of the festival with tickets to two films, *Ashes of Time* and *Chungking Express*, by a Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai, about whom I knew nothing. How had I arrived at this situation?

A number of years ago, I had been introduced to Hong Kong cinema at a festival screening of John Woo's *Once a Thief* (1991). I had sat in the audience for the first twenty minutes or so, wondering what I was doing at this very commercial film, when the overproduced style and slight loopiness of the narrative began to intrigue me. However, *Once a Thief* is not a typical Woo film. It's very lightweight, a kind of Chinese screwball comedy, in its triangulated plot about three art thieves. Later that same year, I dragged my brother to see an earlier film by Woo, *The Killer* (1989) at the Ontario Cinematheque. Despite the ludicrously inept subtitles—apparently an occupational hazard for Hong Kong film fans—I was intrigued by the fast pace, balletically-choreographed shootouts, which served, for me at any rate, to distance the impact of the violence rather than heighten it in the Hollywood manner, and the character and style of the protagonist, played by Chow Yun-fat, a well-known Hong Kong actor who combines the comedic charm and grace of Cary Grant with the toughness of a *bel-laid* like Jean-Paul Belmondo or Robert De Niro.

The following year, while waiting in a lineup for *Reservoir Dogs*, I got into a discussion with a young man standing in front of me about John Woo, whose latest film, *Hard-Boiled* (1992), was also being screened at the festival. He turned out to be an avid fan of Hong Kong films,¹ and recommended Suspect Video on Markham Street in Toronto as a local source for videotapes of these films which rarely get screened theatrically outside of Chinatown. Consequently, since then I have managed to see all of Woo's later films, from *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) to his first Hollywood venture, *Hard Target* (1993), which I caught at a matinee the day it opened, in a crowd neatly split between Jean Claude van Damme fans (mostly teenage boys) and John Woo fans (mostly Asians with a scattering of Caucasians). Needless to say, there were not many females present. In fact, my fondness for Woo's films is one of those things that would come under what *Film Comment* used to term "Guilty Pleasures," i.e., I'm somewhat embarrassed by my attraction to films in which so much emphasis is on violence, and so many faceless, nameless people get killed in so many diverse ways. However, there's something about his films that reminds me of earlier

American genres like 1940's film noir or 1950's Westerns like Anthony Mann's *Man of the West* ('58) or *The Man from Laramie* ('55), which have at their centre a strong moral code that is manifested in the protagonist's behavior, no matter the odds against him. Loyalty, friendship, honour, dignity, even a sense of chivalry are the cardinal virtues which constitute this code. In the same way that the historical woman's film attempted to deal with issues of femininity, these male-centred films serve to work through definitions of masculinity which problematize rather than resolve the construct.

There were no John Woo films at this year's festival, so I looked through the group of films listed under Asian Horizons to see if there was anything interesting. On page 304 of the catalogue, the photograph accompanying the description of *Ashes of Time* depicted Leslie Cheung (known to me primarily through Woo's films, but also as one of the leads of *Farewell My Concubine*) dressed not in the contemporary western-style clothing of Woo's HK gangster films, but in historical costume. The accompanying text by David Overbey was quite dense and somewhat unclear, but seemed to rave about the film, so I decided to take a chance. On the facing page of the catalogue was listed another film by the same director, although this one, *Chungking Express*, was set in present day Kowloon. The accompanying description was similarly highly complimentary about the visual style and energy of the film, although it did contain the following proviso. "Although interesting, plot is never the main point for Wong Kar-wai." I don't think I fully realized what I was in for.

One of the larger theatres was used for *Ashes of Time*, and it was filled for the screening, mostly with Chinese-speaking people. I was impressed that a director whose work was unfamiliar to Caucasian audiences could have such a large following, my experience being that films like this play to the smallest audiences at the festival. I had obviously underestimated the local Chinese community's involvement in the Film Festival. Visually, the film was stunning...an aesthetic experience that I would place on the same level as Antonioni's *Red Desert* and Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. From the opening titles—stark black text on a white ground—to the closing credits, Wong fills the screen with images of great beauty, long panoramic shots of the sun on the desert, the wind ruffling through expanses of translucent fabric, close-ups of beautiful faces, both male and female. When fights occur, they are shot in such a way that they appear as if in stop motion



photography², a conceit that serves to heighten the aestheticization, taking Woo's choreographed violence one step further. However, while the film is unarguably a feast for the eyes, the mind (Western-trained) is left scrambling for scraps of meaning with which to concoct a narrative, linear or otherwise, that is in any way satisfying. I don't think I have ever sat through a film that I found more confusing than this one, although I am more than willing to concede that much of the difficulty probably stemmed from my unfamiliarity with the language. Because the film was in Chinese, I had to read the subtitles, a situation that I've never had problems with before, but in this film, the titles aren't just translations of spoken dialogue; they also represent interior monologues. *Ashes of Time* begins in a desert hostel with a single character, Ouyang/Leslie Cheung, narrating in a first-person voiceover. A short way into the film, however, as he is telling about a friend of his, Huang/Tony Leung Kar-fai, who has had memory losses, the narrator's voice switches from Ouyang to Huang. Both men are on screen, neither is moving his lips, yet the subtitles indicate that one is speaking. But which one? I missed the exchange of "I's" because I was "reading" it rather than "hearing" it, tied as I was to the written text, and my unfamiliarity with the spoken voice of either actor. Consequently, I couldn't understand why Ouyang had disappeared from the narrative, and the camera was now following Huang. In fact, this exchange of narrator, coded by the change of the voiceover narration, keeps reoccurring. What became apparent eventually was that the film is comprised of a series of linked flashbacks, each of which has its own first-person narrator. In this way, Wong changes the protagonist every so often, as he follows a thread of personal

¹ Colin Geddes, who I later discovered was the editor of the film magazine *Asian Eye*, whose first issue in spring 1993 "Hong Kong's Action Explosion," has proven to be an invaluable resource.

² The sequences are shot at a speed of 10 frames per second, and each frame is double printed, the result being to disrupt the flow of the action and blur the image. This is a technique more at home in a commercial or music video than in a feature film, for it draws the viewer's attention to the technical devices being used to produce it. Conventional filmmaking notoriously hides its construction to effect an illusion of diegetic reality.

histories that interweave to create the “master” narrative. To further complicate things, one of the main characters, Murong/Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia, has both a female identity (Murong Yang) and a male one (Murong Yin).³

Although set in what appeared to be a timeless historical China, the film is full of allusions that draw on a multitude of references, from Japanese Samurai films (the swordplay, costumes, etc.) through “spaghetti” westerns—there’s one sequence involving a group of Chinese horse thieves attacking another that you’d swear was taking place in a sleepy Mexican village as seen through Sergio Leone’s viewfinder. Even the costumes looked Mexican!

When the film ended, I sat there, not knowing what to make of it. Quite a few of the non-Chinese spectators had left early, while the Chinese viewers had not only stayed but, from their enthusiastic response, enjoyed the film. I, on the other hand, needed someone to explain to me what the film was about, and why it looked the way it did. Now, given my confusion, I could have passed on the second Wong Kar-wai film, but there was something about *Ashes of Time* that made me want to understand it, not dismiss it. I assumed that the problem was in the translation from the Chinese, in my being confronted with a truly foreign film language that needed interpretation. Nothing in John Woo’s films had so challenged me. In comparison, his films are all straightforward narratives that reflect a Hollywood style inflected by Hong Kong themes. *Ashes of Time* seemed to be following a different set of driving principles. While Wong displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of film history and technique, his emphasis also involved a self-conscious aestheticizing tendency; in other words, what I had just seen seemed to be the Chinese equivalent of a European-style modernist “art” film, where the pace of the narrative is slowed down by an attention to formal embellishments whose effect is to produce an overall mood—of loss, of loneliness, of alienation.

The second film, *Chungking Express*, reinforced my gut feeling that Wong Kar-wai was a truly interesting director. This film, set in present-day Hong Kong, opens with a (very) young policeman, He Qiwu, bemoaning the breakup of his relationship with his girlfriend, May. For consolation, he sets himself the task of consuming each day for the month of April a tin of pineapple (May’s favourite fruit) whose expiry date is May 1, 1994. (This provides a charming trope on the notion of expiry dates for

people’s relationships, as well as a funny scene where he’s trying to buy a can that has just expired). This tactic failing to convince May to return to him, he gets drunk and decides to fall in love with the first woman he meets. Meanwhile, we’ve been introduced to a second thread, where a nameless woman played by Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia, in blonde wig, trenchcoat, and dark glasses, is betrayed by a group of South-east Asians she’s using to smuggle drugs. Unless she finds them, she’s dead. Amidst a delirious amalgam of American filmic allusions, from film noir through to *Blade Runner*, the narrative finally brings the two together, as they sit side by side in a bar. Our expectations run high; after all, he’s a cop, she’s a gangster; they’ve found each other...but nothing happens. The camera then begins to follow another story, involving a young woman, Faye, who works at *Midnight Express*, a fast food counter. Another policeman, known to us only as #663, frequents the shop, buying club sandwiches for his stewardess girlfriend. After Faye intercepts a “Dear John” letter written to him by the girlfriend, she becomes obsessed with him, to the point of breaking into his apartment in order to clean it and rearrange the furniture. Their relationship develops to where they arrange to meet at a restaurant called “California.” She doesn’t show up, however, having taken off for the real California. By the film’s end, though, they are reunited.

While *Chungking Express* was much easier to follow than *Ashes of Time*, I still found myself waiting for an explanation as to why the first story had been abandoned, or at the least, I expected the re-introduction of some of its characters into the second one. But that didn’t happen. Essentially, the film is really two tales linked only by location and heavily accented style (all-American, even the music...one of the key theme songs is “What a Difference a Day Makes”). And as with *Ashes of Time*, after the screening, I found myself returning to the festival catalogue’s description in a search for answers to my questions.

II

Curiously enough, among all the films I encountered during the festival, it was *Ashes of Time* and *Chungking Express* which stayed with me the longest, puzzling me in their strangeness, yet fascinating me by their difference from the conventional forms. I became determined to investigate the director’s history and place him within the HK film community, not an easy task considering the language barriers.

The first step was to try to see the films again,

but this proved impossible. Suspect Video, invaluable for HK martial arts and gangster films, came up empty. It carries only one of Wong's films, *Days of Being Wild*⁴ (1991), which proved to be just as dramatically shot as his later ones, yet as opaque as *Ashes in Time* with regards to motivation of plot. (It does, however, contain an incredible sequence which self-consciously approximates the famous opening long take of Welles's *Touch of Evil*, down to the wildly inappropriate, given the Philippines setting, Mexican-style sound-track.) Further research at the Ontario Cinematheque's film library provided me with some press kits and a few clippings, although the written English language in the press kits appeared to be on only a slightly higher level than that of the subtitles. For example, in the *Ashes of Time* literature, the theme is cited as follows:

"When one discovers that one can no longer possess what one once own (youth, love, etc.,) one can only turn them into one's memory and try to keep them as such."

Not much help, I'm afraid. A short interview with Wong Kar-wai in the publicity material for *As Tears Go By* (1989) intriguingly indicated his admiration for Martin Scorsese's work, with the inference that a correlation existed between Wong's first film and *Mean Streets*. His second film, *Days of Being Wild* (1991), won five HK film awards but was a failure, commercially. He began work on *Ashes of Time* shortly afterwards, but didn't complete it until 1994. It was a big budget (at 5.5 m US, massive by Hong Kong standards), big cast costume drama film that necessitated a complicated production schedule. *Chungking Express*, on the other hand, was begun during post production of *Ashes of Time*, shot on a limited budget using a handheld camera, and completed within three months. In fact, the final print was ready only at the last moment for the festival's screening.

A search through the latest film magazines turned up two entries. The French film journal, *Positif*, in its November, 1994 issue, contained reports from the Venice Film Festival, held around the same time as the Toronto International Film Festival. It recognized *Ashes of Time* as one of the highlights of the festival, even though it wasn't shown until the last day. In addition, Wong was singled out as "the most talented director of the new wave in Hong Kong" in his "post-modernity," close to certain Hollywood currents as represented by the Coens, David Lynch, and Quentin Tarantino. *Variety*, in its own inimitable way, also reported

from the Venice Film Festival, where it described *Ashes in Time* as Hong Kong's first "art movie. "Reaction in Venice, it claimed, swung from "passionate support to total confusion." (I could sympathize with this one, having experienced both reactions myself, simultaneously.)

Turning to an interview with John Woo⁵ from the fall of '92, I was surprised to find out that, in answer to a question about new Hong Kong directors, his response was that Wong Kar-wai was someone he liked a lot. Woo explained the difficulty of making films in Hong Kong; commercially successful films are either action or comedy. "It is very difficult to have ideas in HK. Only important directors can, people like Tsui Hark, Wong Kar-wai, Ann Hui, and me. But for the others, they have to compromise a lot and it is very difficult to live from cinema itself, even though we produce so many films."⁶

III

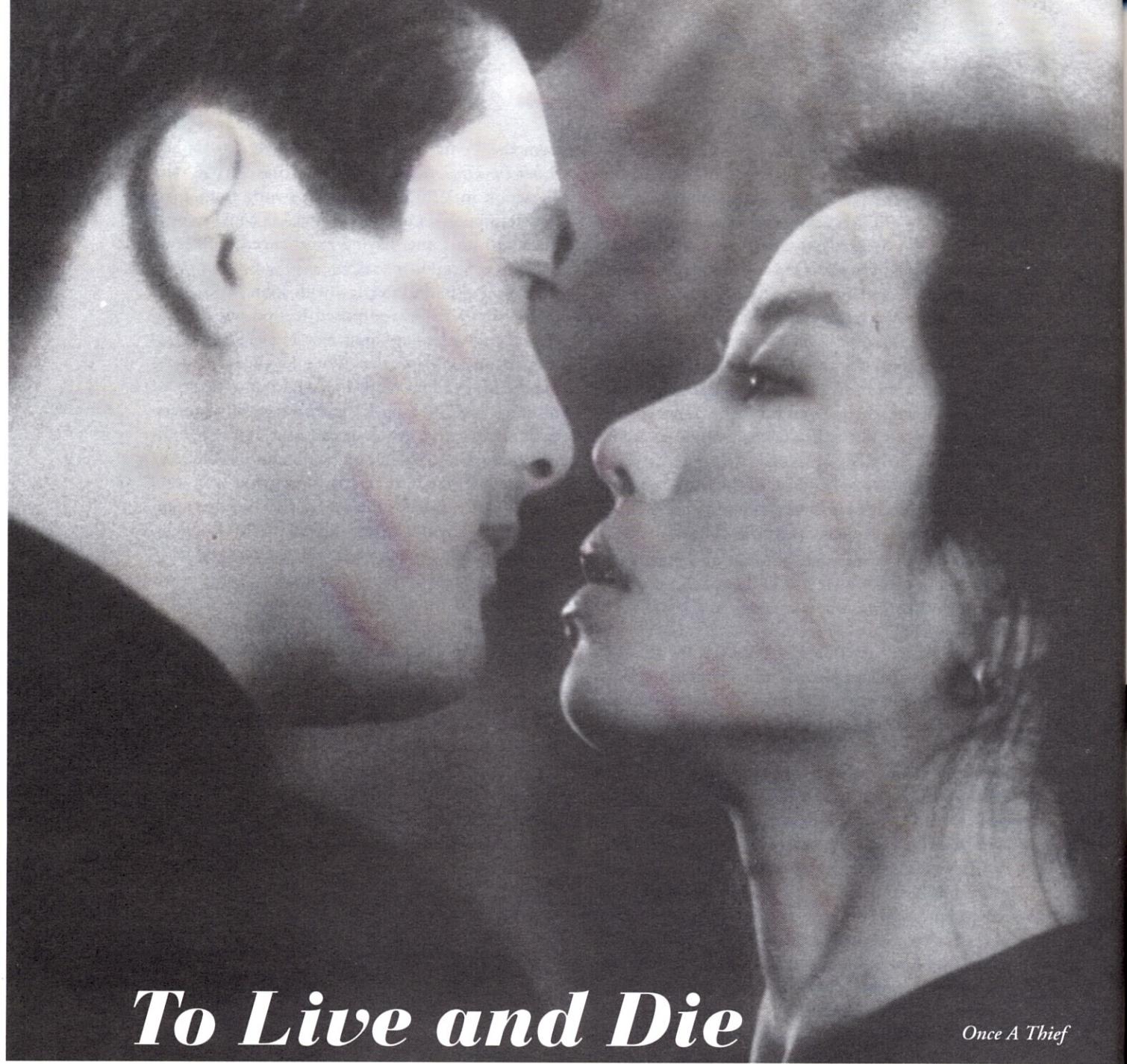
Writing for deadline, I have temporarily ceased my quest for Wong, but have no intention of leaving it here. A new world of film has opened up for me and I'm very excited by it. My eternal gratitude to the Toronto Film Festival, for exposing us to films beyond Hollywood.

³ This kind of gender-switching is apparently quite common in HK films, and the actress Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia seems to have made a specialty of it. An audience familiar with both the actress and the custom would thus automatically understand the codes involved and the play on meaning intended, while a "naïve" viewer has no access to that level of comprehension. For an interesting analysis of this characteristic feature of HK films, see Roland Chu's "Swordsman II and The East is Red: The Hong Kong Film," "Entertainment, and Gender" in *Bright Lights Film Journal* no. 13, Summer, 1994, pp.30-35, 46.

⁴ I don't know where the English names for these films come from or who makes them up, but I doubt whether they are mere translations of the Chinese titles. *Ashes of Time*, for example, has a Chinese title, *Huang Ouyang*, (derived from the names of the two male leads, Leslie Cheung and Tony Leung Kar-fai) which translates as "Evil East, Poisonous West," perhaps considered not too catchy by Western standards. Many titles seem to derive from Western movie titles already in use, like Woo's *Once a Thief* and *The Killer*, and even pop songs. Wong's first film is titled *As Tears Go By*.

⁵ p. 9, *Asian Eye*, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid.



To Live and Die IN HONG KONG

Once A Thief

THE CRISIS CINEMA OF JOHN WOO

by Tony Williams

The current era represents a Dickensian "worst of times" for Hollywood cinema. Within a decade soon to celebrate the "birth of cinema," studio executives will undoubtedly envisage some form of tacky retrospective, similar to the Reagan era's celebration of the Statue of Liberty's centennial. Once exemplifying the best of what Andre Bazin termed "the genius of the system," most Hollywood movies now reproduce the unimaginative and corporate assembly line products Robert Altman's supposedly ironic (but hypocritically complicit) *The Player* (1992) celebrates. A similar lack of vitality affects European productions, which now either replay insipid versions of the "cinema of quality" that Cahiers du Cinema once rallied against or approach past historical crises via evasive spectacular, melodramatic, or erotic depictions such as *L'Amant* (1991), *Indo-Chine* (1992), and *Germinale* (1993). Confronting such a situation evokes despair, unless one looks outside to interesting achievements within other national cinemas.

Whether phrased in the postmodernist discourse or not, the current decade exhibits a "crisis" aura, politically and artistically. It is unnecessary to embrace entirely the writings of Lyotard and Baudrillard to realize that the contemporary situation illustrates a lack of confidence, despair, artistic bankruptcy, lack of faith in progress, and the loss of certainties guaranteed by old "master" narratives. Although the "fin de siecle" mood characterized previous decades, the present era undoubtedly reflects crisis-ridden apocalyptic scenarios, often mediated cinematically.¹

Despite its doom-laden aura, the apocalyptic is not totally nihilistic. As Lois Parkinson Zamora notes, the concept is a dialectical one, balancing crisis and renewal, tribulation and triumph, chaos and order, death and rebirth. This creative tension has roots within the prophetic and eschatological discourse strongly inherent within cultural productions.² Although an apocalyptic climate may breed a cinema of nihilism influenced by updatings of Daniel Bell's 1960 "end of ideology" thesis, renovated by capitalism's supposed "victory" over communism, it

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may also exhibit creative tensions containing seeds awaiting a positive environment, or *better tomorrow*. One contemporary example is the work of John Woo and his association with Hong Kong cinema.

Since 1986, Woo has produced some of his most dynamic and exciting work, equivalent to Sergio Leone's work within the western, rejuvenating the gangster genre as his idol Jean-Pierre Melville once did. It is tempting to hail Woo as an "auteur" were it not for overtly individualistic elements associated with the term. However, despite Michel Foucault's influential "death of the author" thesis, a director's active involvement is clearly present in most worthwhile productions. Contemporary theorists usually ignore the fact that John Caughe's 1981 collection, *Theories of Authorship*, actually concludes in recognizing the position of a director intertwined within a number of relevant discourses such as gender, industry, history, and economics. This is especially so in any national cinema, even Hollywood. In Peter Graham's sadly out-of-print collection, *The New Wave* (1968), Andre Bazin's stimulating essay, "La politique des auteurs" focused attention on salient factors of cultural tradition and the "genius of the system" influencing creative freedom—the tradition of genres is a base of operations for creative freedom" (154).

John Woo (Wu Yusen) began making 8mm films in 1967, working his way up from production assistant to directing at Golden Harvest in 1973. According to sources familiar with his earlier work, his pre-1986 films "lack the stylishness of his more recent gangster flicks."³

Described by Bernice Reynaud as a "gentle, almost shy man, an intellectual, an auteur who writes his own screenplays and supervises the editing of his films, Woo was turned on by the French New Wave in highschool, wrote film criticism, and made experimental Super 8 movies" (60). Familiar with both Western cinema and Hong Kong's diverse cinematic genres, it was not until his association with producer-director Tsui Hark at the Film Workshop and the 1986 release of *A Better Tomorrow* that he became a recognizable talent, bringing him to the attention of Martin Scorsese, Sam Raimi, Oliver Stone, and Quentin Tarantino. From *A Better Tomorrow* to *Hard Boiled* (1992), Woo has worked (usually in association with Tsui Hark) with a recognizable repertory company comprising actors Chow Yun-Fat, Leslie Cheung, Ti Lung, Chu Kong, Danny Lee, Shing Fui-On, Lam Chung, cinematographer Wong Wing-Hang, and music editor David Wu. He often men-

tions that his films, from *A Better Tomorrow* to *The Killer* (1989), express his friendship with Hark and Chow Yun-Fat. Woo collaborated with Hark in the early 1980s when they supported each other in the film industry. This lies behind the friendship between Mark and Ho in *A Better Tomorrow* (Smith, 17). Chow describes Woo as "a very romantic and sensual director who puts a lot of himself in his films: love, human dignity, but also anger about the loss of tradition in the cities. He's a very traditional Chinese" (Reynaud, 60). It is hardly coincidental that Dean Shek in *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) resembles Tsui Hark, who appears in a brief cameo role in the earlier film as a judge evaluating Jackie's (Emily Chu) musical abilities. Shing Fui-On and Lam Chung are Woo's villains, his equivalent to the Italian Western's frequent use of Fernando Sancho as definitive bad guy. However, certain cultural factors also influence Woo.

According to Esther Yau, contemporary Hong Kong cinema exhibits a deep preoccupation with the imminent return to mainland China.⁴ Unlike most former colonial dependencies, Hong Kong has no strongly embedded national traditions. Like Taiwan, it is a deeply rooted capitalist economy, having experienced rapid economic growth over several decades. Fully aware of its complicity with the colonial era and contemporary western capitalism, the colony naturally views its return to China with foreboding. It views the 1997 incorporation as a threat to its quintessential hybrid and heterogeneous nature. Hong Kong's dilemma reveals itself within a culturally split subjectivity characterized by struggle and complicity with western traditions. Its cinema reflects a site of contesting identifications, often rooted in past and contemporary Chinese traditions but also highly influenced by western values. The former '70s martial arts genre is one example, a genre influenced by the Italian western, as various films starring Wang Yu, David Chiang, Ti Lung, and Angela Mao Ying reveal. Merger with the mainland threatens this peculiar aura of "contestation." Thus contemporary Hong Kong movies developed a survival myth to counter an envisaged historical and cultural apocalypse.

For this British colony, 1997 is the equivalent to Marx's phantom haunting Europe in *The Communist Manifesto*. Return to the motherland affects population and artistic community with deep foreboding. Already shocked by the 1989 events of Tiananmen Square, contemporary Hong Kong cinema produces films that display a deep awareness of an event that will affect its future, one way or another.

Nineteen ninety-seven represents the “end of the world” for most Hong Kong talents.⁵ As Esther Yau observes, Hong Kong’s film industry currently operates according to a dreaded, future interior mode of narration. This explains the current predominance of gangster films. For Hong Kong critic Lee Cheukto, “People have a feeling of foreboding over 1997...These heroes from the lawless days show that people can survive and even succeed in a bad situation.”⁶

This scenario dominates Woo’s 1986 productions. His spectacularly choreographed bloodbaths represent intensive survival tests anticipating 1997. These sequences involve catastrophic ordeals involving blood, gunfire, explosions, and apocalyptic hellfire imagery testing the male body’s physical endurance. Tiananmen Square dominates *A Bullet in the Head*. The three heroes find their British Hong Kong passports little protection against Vietnamese brutality. Thanks to the British government, passports become devalued documents for those of the wrong color. Ben (Tony Leung), Frank (Jacky Cheung) and Paul (Waise Lee) face identical acts of violence by South and North Vietnamese military. The situations represent metaphorical Judgment Day scenarios for 1997 Hong Kong. Woo reconstructs Eddie Adams’s 1968 photograph of a Viet Cong suspect’s execution, as well as the heroic stance of the unknown solitary Chinese student who confronted a Tiananmen Square tank. Noting these motifs, J. Hoberman comments, “Woo’s Vietnam war is full of blatantly contemporary parallels. A lone demonstrator stops a tank; one adventurer comforts another, ‘Don’t worry, we came here by boat and we’ll return by boat too.’ Like Sam Fuller, Woo can’t resist conflating the personal and historical.”

Despite the currently misunderstood definition of him as “master of violence” (one also inappropriate to Sam Peckinpah), Woo is no slam-bang director. While using elements of dynamic montage in action sequences both inside and outside the frame, his work also contains quiet moments resembling Eisenstein’s lyrical tonal montage sequences. These often provide his heroes with moments of reflection on their contemporary historical situation.⁷ Eisenstein wrote of *Battleship Potemkin* as containing a particular dialectical organic unity and pathos. Woo’s poignant, quiet moments parallel the relationship the “Appeal from the Dead” has to the rest of the events in *Potemkin*. They have a direct connection, historically and culturally, to Woo’s particular “structure of feeling.”

In *A Better Tomorrow*, physically incapacitated

Mark (Chow Yun-Fat) agonizes over a lost world with Ho (Ti Lung). Things have changed both personally and professionally. He muses, “I never realized Hong Kong looked so good at night. Like most things, it won’t last. That’s for sure.” This scene parallels a similar moment in *The Killer* when Jeff (Chow Yun-Fat) and Sydney Fung (Chu Kong) discuss changes in their particular lives. “Our world is changing too fast. It never used to be like this. We’re getting too nostalgic.” Both these scenes occur on top of a hill overlooking the vulnerable Hong Kong urban landscape. It is not too great a leap of imagination to see these personal dialogues expressing foreboding about the future. Themes of exile and return occur in these moments. In *A Better Tomorrow II*, Lung (Dean Shek) speaks to Ken (Chow Yun-Fat) against a misty New York landscape before they depart for Hong Kong. “This is, after all, not our own place.” Ken replies, “Many try

¹ For historical evidence of late nineteenth century “fin de siècle” pessimism, see Alex Callinicos, *Against Post-Modernism: A Marxist Critique*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

² See Lois P. Zamora (ed.) *The Apocalyptic Vision in America*. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1982); Christopher Sharrett (ed.) *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*. (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1993).

³ Richard A. Akiyama, personal communication, April 23, 1992. During my spring 1992, 400 level gangster movie class, undergraduate student Teo Hee Kwang commented that Woo’s *Better Tomorrow*’s styles resemble those of Chang Cheh, a Hong Kong director who produced several popular chivalry movies, in which John Woo was assistant director. “For example, the use of slow-motion, the exaggeration of one against a hundred opponents, the portrayal of friendship, had appeared before in his early films *Young Dragons* (1973) and *The Hand of Death* (1975).” Woo preferred knightly kung-fu films such as *Last Hurrah for Chivalry* (1979) but due to problems on the film was forced to make comedy again. Kwang notes that *A Better Tomorrow* avoids the pessimistic and melancholy 60s styles by emphasizing personal relationships. I wish to acknowledge the comments of my students in this very rewarding class. Woo recently admitted that *Just Heroes* was a collaborative directors’ film honoring Chang Cheh.

⁴ Esther Yau, “Survival and the Post-Colonial Dilemma,” a paper presented at The Society for Cinema Studies Conference, New Orleans, February 13, 1992.

⁵ See “The shadow of the square,” *The Economist* May 12 (1990): 93-94; Lester Goldsmith, “Chopsockys in the Rockies?” *Variety* June 17 (1991): 3, 92; Peter Bart, “Here’s Looking at H.K.” *Variety* October 14 (1991): 5, 8; Stacy Mosher, “Shot by the mob,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* January 30 (1992): 40-42; and Tony Rayns, “Hard Boiled,” *Sight and Sound* 4 (1992): 20-23. I am grateful to Eirene Chong for bringing these references to my attention. 6. Mosher, 29.

⁷ See Sergei Eisenstein, “The Structure of the Film,” *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1977), 165, where he refers to the “Appeal from the Dead” sequence as providing the dead halt of a *caesura*; the stormy action of the beginning is completely halted in order to take a fresh start for the second half of the film.

to leave home at any cost. Many want to go home. Some cannot find a temporary home to rest. One's home is always better." Although the characters are supposedly in America, the scene looks as if it was shot outside Hong Kong. If so, it gains an added poignancy. Characters look at a world they will soon lose. Prior to their departure to South Vietnam, the three young heroes of *A Bullet in the Head* look down upon a Hong Kong landscape they will leave in the morning. In the more lighter *Once A Thief* (1991), Joe (Chow Yun-Fat), Jim (Leslie Cheung) and Cherie (Cherie Chung) visit the French Riviera and talk about their favorite Hong Kong districts and cuisine. Although expressing regret, "Actually I miss Hong Kong," they all relocate to America at the end of the film. The opening Wyndham Teahouse police surveillance sequence in *Hard Boiled* contains this dialogue between Tequila (Chow Yun-Fat) and his friend. Tequila asks, "Have you ever considered emigrating?" His friend replies, "No. This is my home. I'm going to die. I want to be buried here. I won't get used to living abroad. How'd I get Dim Sum for breakfast?" When Tequila responds "There are Chinese tea houses everywhere," he receives the answer, "But they are more authentic here." A bloody gun battle follows in a teahouse containing several birdcages after the police radio code, "The invasion's about to begin." In the latter part of the film, Tequila and Teresa (Teresa Mo) work as a team to rescue babies from a hospital incubator before the building explodes, saving a future Hong Kong generation from destruction.

The children's choir in *A Better Tomorrow* sings lines relevant both to the characters' personal dilemmas and their future historical situations. "How can they leave their homeland and forget their childhood? Who dares to look at yesterday's sorrows?..The youth don't understand the world. And sully their purity. Let the teardrops roll down your face." However, the song ends on a note of optimism for a better tomorrow—"morning has broken and it brings new lives."

Environments polluted by human corruption become Woo's versions of Hell. His heroes often find themselves trapped within infernoesque regions, whether they be the gangland territories in the *Better Tomorrow* series or both parts of Vietnam in *A Bullet in the Head*. Like Chance Boudreax (Jean Claude Van Damme) in *Hard Target* (1993), his virtuous characters are knightly fallen angels in a twentieth century Hell, often opposing Luciferian counterparts such as Fouchon (Lance Henriksen) and Pick Van Cleaf (Arnold Vosloo), who prefer capitalist riches to

moral values. These supernatural associations are more explicit in John Woo's original director's cut presently available in the Japanese version, rather than Universal's savagely butchered American release. Prior to 1986, Woo served his apprenticeship directing kung-fu movies such as *Last Hurrah for Chivalry* (1979). His later genre, located in the modern era, set traditional Chinese knightly values in a doom-laden western capitalist apocalyptic infernos.

But such apocalyptic foreboding is by no means exclusively pessimistic. Some heroes survive, battered, bullet-ridden and bloody, while others die and even return to life. Bullet-ridden Ben survives the fiery battle in *A Bullet in the Head*, a film mixing elements of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in America*, Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. Mark dies in *A Better Tomorrow* and returns to life as his twin brother, Ken, in *A Better Tomorrow II*. Suffering a series of tragic losses involving his daughter, uncle and niece, Leung mentally regresses into a catatonic, pre-Oedipal position before Ken provokes his resurrection in a hotel apartment whose bloody, womb-like corridors resemble Travis Bickle's psychotic battleground in *Taxi Driver*. Acting like *Rio Bravo*'s John T. Chance, Ken forces Leung's rebirth, stressing the negative effects his regression will have on people who knew him before. "Everybody will be so hurt to see you like this. Why can't you face reality?" After suffering countless bullet wounds in both *Better Tomorrow* films, Kit (Leslie Cheung) finally dies in the second film. However, death is not the end. Woo dialectically contrasts Kit's confrontation with Ko's assassin, Chong, in a dark, womb-like tunnel with Jackie's labor in hospital. As Chong's bullet penetrates Kit, Jackie finally gives birth to their child, a daughter, whom the dying father names "Spirit of Righteousness." Seeing his brother's dead body, the distraught Ho is nearly run over by an ambulance. A uniformed cop pulls him to safety, warning him to be careful. As the tearful Ho looks at his rescuer, the reverse image reveals Kit before showing the cop's actual face. While these scenes occur, Leslie Cheung's voice on the soundtrack sings the film's theme song, "A Better Tomorrow." As the song continues, Lung, Ken, and Ho pay their final respects to Kit prior to avenging his death. Before attacking Ko's home, Ken dons Mark's bullet-ridden raincoat to become his deceased brother in all but name. Chow Yun Fat's facial expressions and matchstick-in-the-teeth imitation of Warren Beatty's Clyde



Barrow and Eastwood's cheroot-smoking Leone persona resurrect Mark of *A Better Tomorrow*.

The resurrection motif continues in other films. Despite Jeff's physical demise at the end of *The Killer*, the final image shows him playing his harmonica before the only environment offering him inner peace—a Catholic Church. The gesture also evokes Charles Bronson's role as Harmonica in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, a man who has "something to do with Death." Although the image reprises an earlier scene, it actually answers distraught Inspector Li's (Danny Lee) call for his deceased friend. *Hard Boiled* also ends with Tony's (Tony Leung) survival beyond death in a heavenly world. He is alone on his yacht at sea, the only haven offering him peace and harmony, floating paper cranes on the waves—offerings to the souls of those he killed.

Although these scenes contain unmistakable references to Catholic resurrection, they also have a

Chinese cultural connection. Woo often speaks about conflating culturally diverse traditions in his films. "I am a Christian, influenced by religious beliefs about love, sin and redemption. The spirit of chivalry that existed in ancient warriors was destroyed, so now we have to face evil alone" (Reynaud, 60). Reynaud also notes the significance of 1997, Hong Kong's moral confusion, the mad race for profit, and the painful split in Chinese identity in many of his films. Several contain moral messages for a younger generation seeing themselves as future Triad gangsters. In *A Better Tomorrow II*, Ken gently chides the Chinese teenagers who enter his New York restaurant dressed like Mark in the previous film. The strip cartoonist later shows Ken Mark's bullet-ridden coat, pointing it out as a lesson for his future conduct. In *Just Heroes* (1989), an impressionable teenager imitates Chow Yun Fat's action movements in *A Better Tomorrow* and *The*

Killer making innumerable blunders. John Chiang finally drags him to the villain's bullet-ridden body to point out the fate of all evil men. The hero, Kwan-Yu, is one of Woo's key images throughout his Hong Kong films, Inhabiting a different world thousands of years ago, Kwan-tu was known for qualities of loyalty and friendship. After death, he became a god in reward for his humanitarian qualities during his life. Woo obviously regards this figure as a better example for his audience. Mark, Kit, Jeff, and Tony are Kwan-Yu's twentieth-century counterparts. Jing-Ke, a famous Chinese hero who attempted to assassinate the emperor of Qin in 220 B.C., is another cultural influence, Woo has said that along with Sun Yat-Sen and Jesus Christ, "I respect Jing-Ke the most," as well as "a lot of Chinese knight stories, so my themes are all around knight errants" (Smith, 17).

While Clara Law's *Farewell China* and Ann Hui's *Song of the Exile* directly deal with problems of migration and identity, Woo's films approach 1997 allegorically through the gangster genre in its western and eastern variants. What is most significant about Woo's treatments is not just his reappropriation and reworking of Melville, Scorsese, and *yakuza-eiga* motifs, but his recognition of gender themes within the genre's classical components. Woo uses the current Hong Kong cultural trauma to undercut a common understanding of the gangster genre as a macho male narrative. He emphasizes elements usually believed to be oppositional.

Woo uses generic conventions of cops and robbers as mirror images within capitalism. Gangster films frequently see them as symbiotic types within an unjust society. Woo understands his cops and robbers as alienated brothers with comparable codes of loyalty and professionalism now obsolete within late capitalism. Influenced by classical Chinese traditions and the martial arts genre, Woo embodies his individual heroes with remarkable characteristics of gentleness and sensitivity. Although lending themselves to gay readings, important cultural factors of gender operate. The east does not always reproduce western conventions of masculinity and femininity. During the Vietnam War, G.I.s often misunderstood the tendency of Vietnamese males to hold hands. By combatting unhealthy capitalist values that threaten traditional Chinese customs, Woo emphasizes heroic qualities of male sensitivity rejected by his capitalist contaminated villains. Woo's successful films stress tenderness and gentleness between males—qualities contrasting with his ritual, climactic bloodbaths. The unsuccessful films are

those such as *Just Heroes*, where these qualities are absent. His pre-1986 work was subject to industrial formula demands. *Heroes Shed No Tears* anticipates the male relationships of later films, but they were marginalized by the influence of other contemporary action films such as *Cannibal Mercenary* (1983). Woo's *Better Tomorrow* box-office breakthroughs stress both Chinese knightly values and features also seen in Hawks and Melville—male sensitivity, gentleness and friendship—qualities that could herald a better tomorrow if society were organized on less violent lines. These characteristics are not exclusively male-orientated. Despite Woo's difficulties in portraying female characters, his heroes often intuitively recognize feminine features within their personalities. Intercut dissolves between Jeff and the madonna statue in *The Killer* emphasize this. Unlike *Le Samourai*, where Valerie (Cathy Rosier) functions as a symbolic Dark Angel of Death for Jeff Costello, Woo's female figures have less negative connotations.

Close bonding between men often appears in the frequent use of freeze frames, suggesting the potential nature of a union only possible outside the historical time of a dominant patriarchal order. Prior to the final confrontation with Johnny Weng's gang, a freeze frame unites male gazes between Inspector Li and Jeff in *The Killer*. In *Hard Boiled*, a freeze frame punctuates the first meeting between Tequila and Tony. The device also occurs significantly in *A Bullet in the Head*. A freeze frame concludes the sequence at Ben's wedding party when the three friends are united before violent circumstances begin to affect their relationship. When Ben later acts as mercy killer to the deranged Frank, a freeze frame close-up shows Frank returning to his former self, acknowledging his friend's act "only at the point of death" (*Once Upon a Time in the West*). The scene parallels Jeff's mercy killing of Sydney in *The Killer*. Sydney wishes to die as a man, not as a "dog," as Johnny Weng ruthlessly taunted him. In *Once A Thief*, a freeze frame concludes the sequence when Chu (Chu Kong) "adopts" the three trainee child criminals. It follows their line, "You're the only one who has been nice to us." Woo's films frequently emphasize looks between males during action sequences such as those between Luke (Simon Yam) and Ben in *A Bullet in the Head* and Tequila and Tony in *Hard Boiled*.

These devices are not purely stylistic. Woo's frequent slow-motion and stop-frame techniques characterize his heroes as belonging to a time different from the twentieth century, descendants from a lost

era of chivalry and friendship. Lung, Ken, and Ho ascend Ko's wall in slow-motion prior to their attack in *A Better Tomorrow II*. After rescuing a damsel in distress, the chivalrous Chance Boudreax of *Hard Target* walks away in stop-motion. Woo's original cut contained many more similar sequences.

Such gentle male features are culturally significant. As Esther Yau notes, a heroic masculinized mode appears in various Hong Kong genres such as action, gambling films, social mobility movies, and "survival of the fittest" themes in movies starring Chow Yun-Fat, Jackie Chan, and Tony Leung. A reflexive "feminine" mode also appears in Hong Kong art cinema films such as *Song of the Exile*. Woo combines these traditions. His positive male heroes (Chow Yun-Fat, Ti Lung, Jacky Cheung, and Leslie Cheung) frequently have "feminine" nonmacho qualities. Woo often subverts traditional gender motifs as well as traditional Hollywood genres such as the musical in his climactic "bloodbaths." Precredit scenes in *A Bullet in the Head* counterpoint a formally choreographed teen dance with a sequence parodying *West Side Story* played to the Monkees "I'm A Believer." *A Bullet in the Head* also deliberately uses experimental art-cinema styles in contrast to more formal conventions seen in the *A Better Tomorrow* films and *The Killer* produced by Tsui Hark.

Kevin Heffernan's aptly titled paper, "Do You Measure Your Friendship in Gold"⁸ highlights a major Woo concern—criticism of human corruption under capitalism. Although fiercely condemning communism, Woo's films also contain radical critiques of western capitalist values. He takes a spontaneous rather than rigorous Marxist position, combining spiritual and humanitarian values which appear in his interviews. "I want to be also artistic, to make scenes from my feelings. I'm not into violence, but I believe that the righteous can use force to stop evil" (Smith, 17). "I hope people understand my intentions. Under the action is a theme, lacking in most violent films, emphasizing the characters' heroic spirit. I'm a dreamer who envisions a better place with no war, no violence and everyone loving and caring for each other. That's why I make my films so romantic, and when I'm shooting a movie, it's a dream" (Carson, 31). "The teachings of Jesus are important to me, and it's important to me that my films stress the importance of love for other people and doing the right thing, even when it isn't the easy thing to do" (McDonagh, 52). In *Hard Boiled*, Woo appears in a cameo role as barman John, Tequila's moral conscience. John points Tequila

toward spiritual values. In one scene, when Tequila comments, "You're so noble," John immediately replies, "Not me. The guy up there."

A Better Tomorrow's precredits and opening scenes contain images showing Hong Kong's hyper-capitalist nightmare existence. Ho dreams of his younger brother, Kit, dying violently from bullets fired by an unseen assailant. The image is black and white. As Kit falls in slow-motion (one of Woo's many homages to Sam Peckinpah), Ho awakes suddenly. He then picks up his friend, Mark, and they drive through Hong Kong's affluent skyscraper district to the counterfeiting headquarters. We then see monochromatic images intercutting the counterfeiting process, with Mark and Ho's faces viewed through a surveillance monitor. When the two meet their American counterparts, the soundtrack contains banal English language conversations between these businessmen of different races (the humor ruined in the dubbed version). Mark and Ho then leave, conscious that smalltalk is merely a superficial veneer for their cold-blooded business dealings. These opening images reveal counterfeit values within economic production and business deals, threatening to corrupt human relationships in postcapitalist Hong Kong.

As the world's most successful capitalist economy, America is never exempt from criticism in Woo's films. His films stress loyalty, tenderness and honesty as antidotes to western dehumanization and violence. One of the most delightful moments preceding Mark's "resurrection" as Ken in *A Better Tomorrow II* is the receptionist's change in tone from depersonalized English to personal Chinese intonation as she recognizes a call from Hong Kong. As Ken prepares Mandarin-style fried rice in the kitchen, he reassures a fellow Chinese about his Green Card. In the same film, Scorsese's punks and Mafia represent the dark underside of American capitalism. Standing up to hoods from the world of *Mean Streets*, Ken overpowers them, mimicking both Eastwood's "Apologize to my mule" from *A Fistful of Dollars* and Robert De Niro's "You talking to me?" from *Taxi Driver*. Eventually battling Mafia and Triads in Ko's house, Ken parodies Hollywood's stereotyped Chinese representations by uttering, "So

⁸ Kevin Heffernan, "Do You Measure Your Friendship in Gold? The Genre Cinema of John Woo," a paper presented at the Hong Kong Cinema: Critical Perspectives Panel at the February 13, 1993 Meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies. I wish to express my thanks to Kevin for allowing me access to this paper and a longer version written on May 6, 1992.

solly" before sending a wounded Mafioso to face divine retribution.

Woo's gangster world represents a traditional Chinese family corrupted by western capitalist values. Although its leaders are variously styled "Uncle" or "Big Brother," they are usually contaminated by money. Exceptions are rare. Leung's retirement does not save him in *A Better Tomorrow II*. The kindly, paternal boss in *Hard Boiled* dies before he can enjoy a new life. Prior to his arrest in *A Better Tomorrow*, "Big Brother" Ho wears a white suit. Released from prison, he finds his subordinate "gunsel" Shing (Lee Che Hung) wearing the "Big Brother" attire, demeaning the fallen Mark by condescendingly giving him handouts. In *A Better Tomorrow II*, sympathetic former "Uncle" Leung has retired, preferring legitimate business and caring for his daughter Peggy. In the opening sequences he encourages her to partake in his youthful ballroom dancing activities. But the formal, ritual nature of this dance, structured according to the delicate overtones of "The Blue Danube," ironically foreshadows the more brutal ritual bloodbath he will finally participate in. As Leung tells Ho, "Better to hold up your hands in the air, then walk out later with your head in the air." Leung never wears the white suit. But his crooked partner Ko does at the film's climax. Leung's dark suit unites him with Ho and Ken as a friend, not as a ruthless gangster patriarch. In the more lighthearted *Once A Thief*, Chu adopts a young criminal trio abused by their Fagin-like father "Dad." In later life, they affectionately call him "Papa," although he is more of a gentle friend to them than a "Dad."

"Dad" is corrupted by capitalist values. As he tells his French counterpart, "We are two of a kind. We both like money." He hoards a stolen painting, greedily enjoying its increasing value. One of the film's most delightful scenes occurs at a Hong Kong charity auction for handicapped children. The wheelchair-bound Joe confronts "Dad," who earlier pushed him down the steps. "Dad, you're just pretending to be charitable...Do they know you're such a hypocrite. Are you doing this to buy respectability?" After raising the bidding, Joe pushes Dad's recently acquired priceless antique on to the floor, smashing it to pieces. The sequence ends ironically as the auctioneer requests the cleaning staff to remove the now "worthless ceramic pieces" from the floor. Dad stops at nothing to regain the Harem's Servant portrait, ruthlessly sacrificing his other grown-up gangster "children" and shooting the



defenseless Joe. Eventually, like James Caan in Peckinpah's *The Killer Elite* (1975), Joe reverses the situation in a delightfully surprising manner.

In *A Better Tomorrow*, Ho's own family contains the seeds of future dissension, anticipating the breach between him and Kit. Woo's family values are not those of patriarchal capitalism but those of a "better tomorrow," where loyalty, kindness, understanding, forgiveness and tenderness reign. Kit graduates from the Hong Kong police force unaware of Ho's underworld connections. When their father accidentally dies following a rival gang's attack, Kit blames Ho for the tragedy. Despite his dying father's wish that Kit understand his brother's lack of responsibility, Kit takes a rigidly, vengeful, patriarchal attitude toward his brother for most of the film. The vengeance codas of Anthony Mann's *Winchester 73* (1950) and the Italian Western vendetta world dominate him. Ho and Kit's former close bonding (paralleling Ho and Mark's friendship) becomes a negative version of the cops and robbers games they played as children. Kit brutally beats Ho up in the rain, violently re-enacting the playful fight they had on the waterfront prior to Kit's graduation. Woo's violent, adult, gangster world is a dark version of



The Killer

games originally played in childhood. This insight parallels elements within Sergio Leone's Westerns. Prior to the murder scene soon to be enacted, Silvanito crouches down with The Man with No Name to spy on Ramon's gang in *A Fistful of Dollars* and utters, "This is just like playing cowboys and Indians." In *For A Few Dollars More*, the young Mexican boys watch the opening confrontation between No Name and Colonel Mortimer, drawing comparisons with their own games. Playacting becomes more ominous in *A Better Tomorrow II* where Ho re-enacts Dennis O'Keefe's actions by standing helplessly by while Charles McGraw murders his partner in Mann's *T-Men* (1947). On this occasion, Ho has to shoot his own brother.

The most tragic victim of capitalism and family in Woo's films is Frank of *A Bullet in the Head*. One of Woo's most sympathetic characters, he is first seen playfully flying a kite. His mother blames him for his father's arrest and hits him on the head. This sets in motion the film's titular trajectory in which succeeding blows to the head become more deadly. As he later tells Ben, "I'm used to being beaten up by Mom." Ironically, his sincere attempt to get money for Ben's wedding celebrations sets in

motion the film's tragic course of events. Attacked by Ringo and his gang, he suffers a blow on the head from a bottle. Even if acquired for the most well-meaning motives, the necessity for money contaminates everything. It leads to exile from Hong Kong and expulsion to Vietnam's infernoesque realm. In their escape from Saigon, Frank begins giving money to Vietnamese refugees, sympathizing with their plight, "They're so pitiful." After Sally's death, he throws Paul's precious gold leaves into the river, later mediating between Paul and Ben's threatened gun battle, "Do you measure your friendship in gold?" In a scene derived from *The Deer Hunter* but filmed more excessively, the North Vietnamese turn the gentle Frank into a monstrous killer. Temporarily saved by the American attack, Frank pleads with Paul to leave the money behind. Shot in the head by his friend, Frank later becomes a pathetic Frankenstein-monster heroin addict, dependent upon money from contract killings for his temporary drug-addicted fixes from psychological pain.

Money and political situations poison the lives of all Woo's leading characters, making any attempts at love, romance, and friendship extremely problematic. A Maoist-inspired Hong Kong political demonstration mars the initial meeting between Ben and Jane (Yolinda Yam). Prior to Ben's departure for Saigon, an exploding bomb from a more violent demonstration ironically punctuates their last encounter. It immediately follows their last kiss and ends with disturbing images of the sapper's mutilated body.

Woo uses motifs from western Catholicism and Buddhism to allegorize lost qualities highly relevant to twentieth century survival. He understands them not as institutionalized, metaphysical conventions, but as socially relevant spiritual qualities his alienated characters desperately need. Before the final battle in *A Better Tomorrow*, Mark peacefully muses in Kwan-Yu's temple. When Ho asks, "Do you believe in God?" Mark replies, "I'm the god. God is a human. Anyone can be god if he can control his life." Ho answers, "Only we never know how things will turn out." The sequence ends with Woo's characteristic freeze frame, with Mark in close-up after the lines, "No, you don't." In the final scenes, Mark undertakes his last act of reconciliation between Ho and Kit before his death. Berating Kit for misunderstanding his brother's true heroism, Mark looks on as Kit cradles Ho in his arms. The brothers' posture resembles Pieta imagery.

Woo regards the Virgin as symbolic of feminine anima qualities of tenderness and compassion neces-

sary for a brutal world. When Sydney Fung meets Jeff in the Catholic church during *The Killer's* opening scenes, he enquires about his friend's fascination with the location. Jeff replies that the church (run by a Hong Kong missionary) gives him tranquility. Introductory images contrast Jeff's gentle expression with the Madonna's comforting visage. When later fragmented by Frank Cheng's high-power rifle, its slow-motion destruction evokes overtones of desecration and defilement. A religious soundtrack leitmotif emphasizes this. The Madonna symbolizes Jeff's suppressed feminine qualities, an interpretation supported by succeeding images of Jenny's (Sally Yeh) large poster in the nightclub which Jeff passes in slow-motion. The slow-motion shots begin when Jeff leaves the church and only change into real-time when he begins his murderous hit-man activities.

Pieta imagery symbolizes lost qualities of tenderness and closeness, which Woo's heroes must attempt to regain before death. In *A Bullet in the Head*, Woo uses a rack-focus shot changing from the murdered Viet Cong assassin's falling body to show the Pieta statue in the background, subtly underscoring the horrendous aspect of male violence. The act occurs in a Catholic school run by nuns for Vietnamese children. A military, masculine invasion tarnishes childhood's peaceful world. Like Peckinpah, Woo frequently shows children as victims of an adult world. But he never depicts them in a deterministic Social Darwinist manner. Woo constantly affirms childhood qualities of innocence opposing a patriarchal world's violent excesses. Buddhist monks act progressively to change Saigon society. They later care for Ben after Paul leaves a trail of bodies at the North Vietnamese village. Woo's frequent use of the cross symbolizes both male anguish (inter-cut in shots of Jeff's expressions of pain as Sydney removes bullets from his back in the church) and transcendental values not limited to any one religion.

Kwan-Yu, as a human knight living thousands of years ago, displayed qualities of friendship and loyalty, helping his friend to become Emperor and achieving deification after death. Both *The Killer* and *Hard Boiled* feature his shrine in police departments. However, these old values of friendship receive embodiment in twentieth century guises. In *A Better Tomorrow II*, a strip cartoonist draws images of Ho, Kit, and Mark bemoaning the fact that "there are no longer any friends around as those three." The film's final scene shows the wounded Ho, Lung, and Ken seated in chairs, identically resembling portraits

showing Kwan-Yu at the Emperor's right with sword (Ho), the Emperor (Lung), and a friend (Ken) at his left.⁹ Chinese audiences would immediately recognize this association, while Western audiences could mistake it for an ironic echo of Christ on the cross between two thieves.

As Woo never uses storyboards, encouraging spontaneous performances, his use of strip-cartoon style is deliberate (Vie, 13). In a Hong Kong lacking old cultural traditions, he understands the necessity of appropriating new visual forms to recreate those ancient lost worlds of honor and friendship which the present sorely needs. Immediately following a typical Woo action sequence, *Just Heroes* presents a ritual Chinese theater performance during the opening credits, thus linking both old and new.

Woo's Hong Kong films are not spectacular vehicles for screen violence. Along with recent works of Hong Kong cinema, they represent a crisis cinema allegorically attempting to come to terms with a foreboding imminent event in the colony's history. But rather than exhibiting preoccupation with an envisaged 1997 doom-laden scenario, they present certain strategies for survival and renewal, mixing old and new traditions, genres, and gender relationships in a hybrid mixture hoping for a better tomorrow. As Lung tells Peggy in the opening scenes of *A Better Tomorrow II*, "Sometimes you have to wait a long time for the applause but when it comes it is worth it." While reflecting the thoughts of both John Woo and Tsui Hark, this line also affirms long overdue recognition for John Woo's post-1986 Hong Kong cinematic achievements.

⁹ I wish to express my thanks to undergraduate student Ms. Ching Jung-Li for this information. Her knowledge of Chinese cultural motifs within Hong Kong Cinema in her senior thesis work on Tsui Hark provided me with very valuable insights and a rewarding educational collaboration.

I would also like to thank student Vincent Wong for his contribution.

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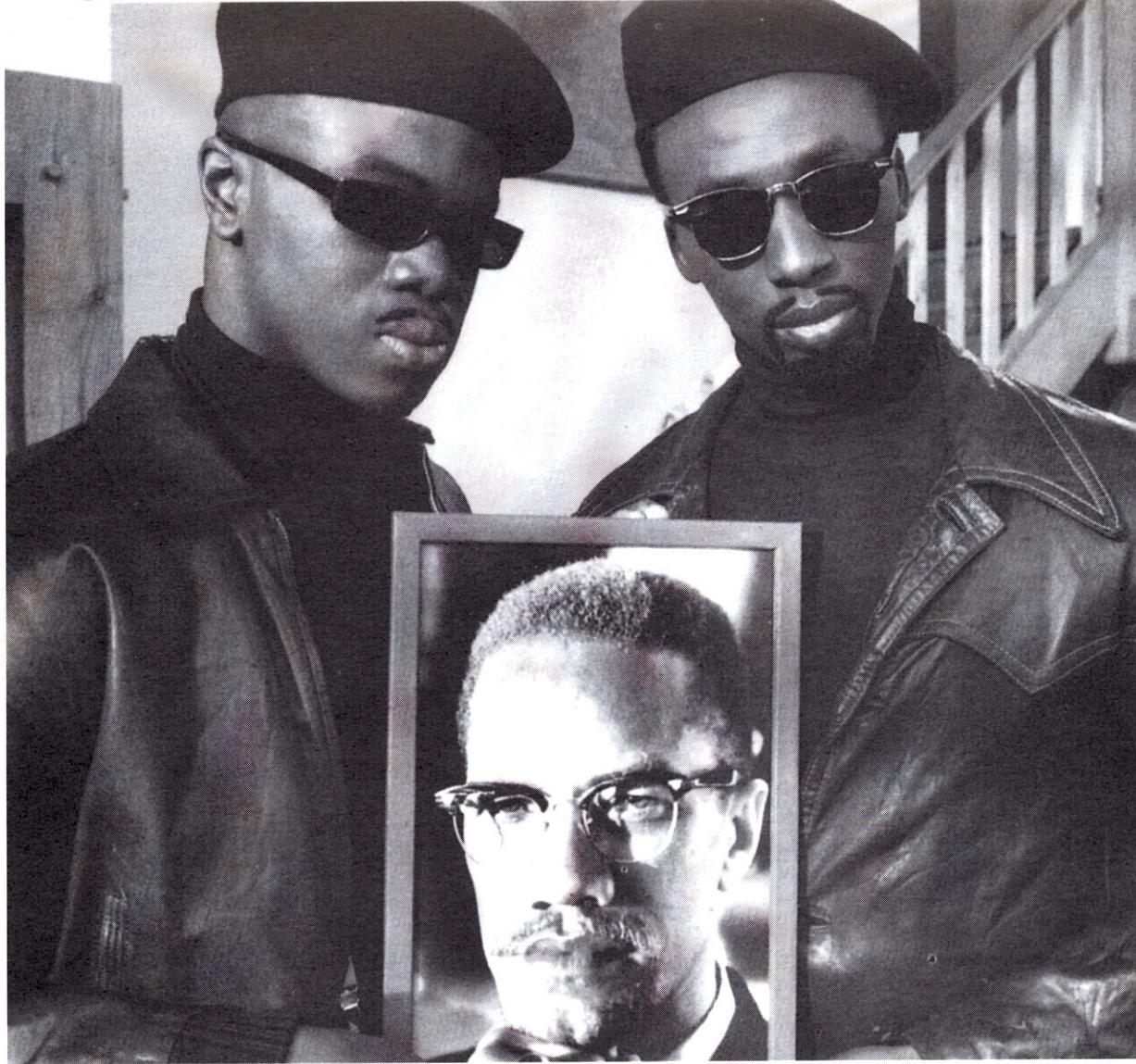
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Ghosts of Stories



Black Audio Film Collective's *Who Needs a Heart?*

by Laura U. Marks

The operation of the value-form makes every commitment negotiable, however urgent it might seem or be.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Public and critical responses to *Who Needs a Heart?* (1991), a feature-length film directed by John Akomfrah for Black Audio Film Collective, were puzzled and not especially warm. To some, the complex interdependence of representation and politics that is Black Audio's trademark seemed to have collapsed into a stylish pastiche in which politics was *only* representation. Many viewers at screenings I attended seemed anxious for a clear authorial voice for biographical details about the shadowy figure the film purports to document for a plot line, dialogue—*something* to hang onto. By

these standards the film was a failure. But in other terms the film pursued—perhaps to a manneristic extent—means Black Audio had used often in the past: a suspicion of documentary evidence, a reliance on poetic recollection, and a sidelong approach to moral narratives.

Who Needs a Heart? was commissioned by Britain's Channel 4 for the series "TV with a Difference." The film crystallizes around the rise of the Black Power movement in Britain and the figure of Michael X, charismatic leader, opportunist, or petty criminal, depending on who you talk to. It consists of a series of micro-narratives, almost non-narratives, that follow the lives of a fictionalized group of people in Michael X's circle from 1963 to 1975. In their struggle to recreate the history of British Black Power and Michael X, Black Audio found that the archives of personal memory and recorded history were not available for Michael X as they were for his more respectable predecessor, Malcolm X. Michael X is himself a trace of something else. For this reason, *Who Needs a Heart?* works best as a docudrama, weaving a fictional story around a thread of history.

Take this scene for example, which opens the film and recurs about three-quarters through it. It is set in 1972, just after Michael X's scheduled execution has been announced on television. A black woman, wearing an Afro, has been marching in the street with a "Free Angela Davis" picket sign, when she approaches her friends' house and hears the news. We hear her footsteps, but her anxious speech is inaudible. The couple in the house have been posing for a white photographer, a record of their domestic tranquility and religious devotion (the woman is wearing a head cover). The interior of the house is lit a deep blue, an island of peace in contrast to the tumultuous events outside. The woman in the Afro collapses in the street, screaming and flailing; her cries are subordinated on the soundtrack to the sound-over news report. The woman posing for the photograph, Naomi, and a white woman run out to comfort her; the photographer carries her into the house. Naomi gently pulls off her wig, and strokes her head. In this scene a wealth of information about relationships, political climate and political affiliations is conveyed through action, gesture, costume, music and production design—with barely a word of dialogue.

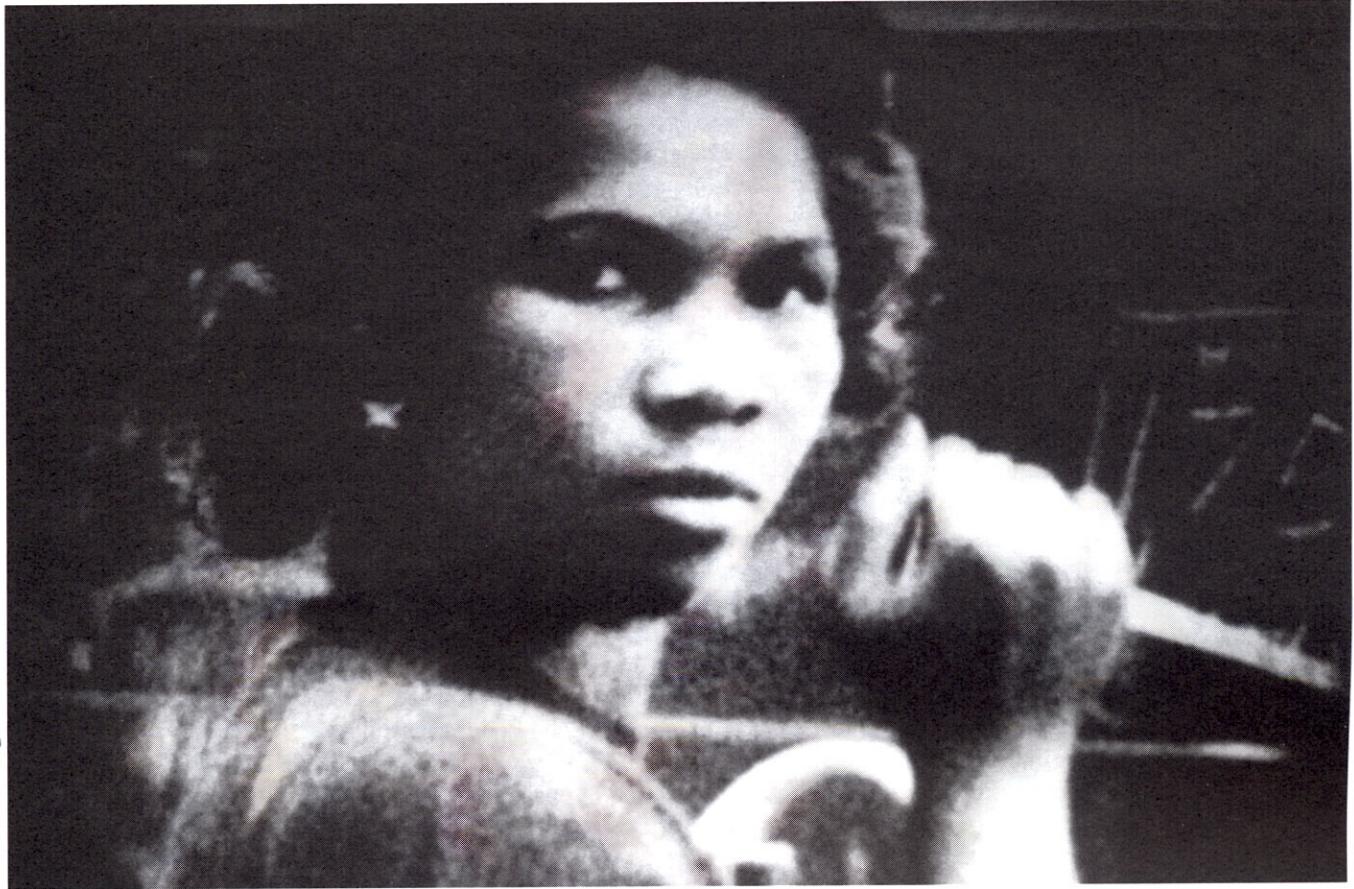
One of the main purposes of *Who Needs a Heart?* is to confound official history, private recollection and simple fiction, and to point to the lacunae that remain, refusing to be wholly influenced by

any of these. The collective found that in trying to excavate the history of Michael X, instead of visual records and oral histories, they discovered silences and disavowal. Those who did recollect X or recalled the '60s radical scene did not want their contributions acknowledged. So, "What's the best way of quoting people who don't want to be acknowledged? Make them mute."¹ And indeed *Who Needs a Heart?* has a pantomime quality. Dialogue, and the kind of knowledge it can convey, are extremely sparse in the film. Entire scenes pass without speech, which is occasionally drowned out by voice-over, but more often obscured by Trevor Mathison's sound track of wild saxophones and what sounds like whale song. This strategy effectively obscures the group's stated motives for being part of the Black Power movement. Instead, a viewer has to assess them through the context of the news reports and by their physical actions—and by what they wear.

The characters are Faith, a white journalist, who falls in love with Louis, a black painter and follower of Michael X; Jack, a black musician, and his pious wife Naomi, who is also black, both of whom are more distantly involved in the movement; Millie, a mentally unstable black painter who has an ongoing affair with a wealthy patron of Michael X named Dominic; Dominic's wife Abigail, an aristocratic ice queen who maintains a flirtation with Simmi, a leather-clad follower of Michael X; and Sydney, a white photographer, Louis's friend and Millie's sometime lover.

Sydney, Faith and Millie provide occasional voice-overs that weave the group's story into the parallel story of Michael X, told through archival news footage. According to this, Michael X (whose other names, Michael de Freitas and Michael Abdul Malik, underscore his self-styled parallel to Malcolm X) began ignominiously with an involvement in drugs, crime, and prostitution, but abandoned this life to found the Racial Advancement Action Society. A rare bit of footage from 1967 shows Michael X meeting with people of Caribbean and South Asian descent in Bradford, already demonstrating the difference between the Black Power movement in Britain and the U.S. fund-raising parties, where well-to-do whites supported the movement and allowed X to found a site called the Black House. Another rare bit of footage shows Yoko Ono and John Lennon donating a hunk of their braided hair, called Peace Hair, to the Black House. The House collapses, Michael X leaves the country. In 1972 he is arrested for murder in Guyana and imprisoned in Trinidad.

Despite his supporters' petitions, he is executed two years later. More footage can be found denouncing Michael X as a criminal than lauding him as a hero, but it's not clear what this proves. In television footage from 1973, a journalist describes Michael X's capture and adds, "de Freitas was one of the first to realize that there was money in colour. He built himself up as a leader not just because of any sense of racial injustice but because he saw there was a profit in it for himself. He enjoyed more success among the whites than among the blacks, who saw him for the cheap hustler that he really was." Yet another journalist quotes Michael as saying that he had no choice but illegal behavior.



Handsworth Songs

How to excavate a stonewall

Black Audio had a great deal of trouble trying to excavate the history of Michael X. The "archive" that was unavailable to the filmmakers was not simply a forbidding Foucauldian closure, but a very real conspiracy of silence among many of the figures involved in the story. According to the collective's Avril Johnson and Lina Gopaul, while some people who had been involved in the Black Power movement in Britain or in the Black House that X founded were willing to tell their stories, others who were implicated in them had more to lose and refused the collective's efforts to contact them. As well as political revolution, Michael X and the Black House trafficked in real estate, money, drugs, sex, and the libidinal charge of class transgression. (Michael X was apparently a rent collector for Rachman, the landlord and go-between who figures in the movie *Scandal* [1988, by Stephen Wooley] about the downfall of parliamentary minister John Profumo.) Hence, perhaps, one reason for the lack of records of Michael X's life. According to Akomfrah, the collective was "concerned with the earnestness around '60s radicalism" and the subsequent "shame around people's involvement in '60s culture"²: people's memories of their own ambivalent and sullied

¹ John Akomfrah, discussion at the 38th Robert Flaherty Seminar, Aurora, NY, August 11, 1993.

² John Akomfrah and June Givanni, Flaherty seminar.

motives for engaging in activism do not line up with the notion of a fiercely single-minded movement.

A more fundamental reason for the stonewalling that met Black Audio's researchers is the rich whites in the circle around X, weekend radicals slumming with the movement. They would inherit positions in the British elite; they are now middle-aged with children, important jobs, and reputations. None of the well-to-do white people who had been involved with Michael X was willing to speak. In addition, when Black Audio began researching the film, Johnson says, they saw archival news footage of events involving Michael X at a number of British television companies. Later, when they were contacted to supply images for the film, much of the footage had been destroyed. (The bits of archival footage in the film are mostly from BBC and Granada.) Confronting this wall of disavowal, and liable to be sued if they named the figures involved, Black Audio chose to make *Who Needs a Heart?* a bizarre hybrid of bedroom farce and political docudrama.

Since Black Audio "couldn't pull off pretending we know something about Michael X," Akomfrah says, they returned to the value of the cinematic: "If uncovering the truth is impossible, then make an impossible film."³ This phrase of Akomfrah's is a strange mirror image of the often-quoted line from *Handsworth Songs* (1986), "there are no stories on the riots, only ghosts of stories." In one expression, the historical referent exists, buried but recoverable through filmic evocation, as one would summon a ghost. But in the later turn of phrase the stuff of cinema has become the primary referent, a document of something that does not exist. To find a trace of the real events, *Who Needs a Heart?* turns inward, to gestures, colors, music. Hence the sense of weightlessness and inversion that baffled so many Black Audio fans.

Mine the gap: history as primal scene

History for Black Audio is a willful act of fictionalizing memory. However, the collective's concern in *Who Needs a Heart?* is to show that the difficulty inherent in these acts of reconstruction by a minority community: the danger of inscribing a new, true story that can be used to name and frame you. Akomfrah has argued eloquently against imperatives for black cultural workers to serve certain political ends. "People assume that there are certain transcendental duties that Black filmmaking has to perform. Because it is in a state of emergence its means always have to be guerrilla means, war means, signposts of urgency. When that begins to inhibit

questions of reflection—doubt, skepticism, intimacy and so on—then the categorical imperative does exactly what it is supposed to do—it imprisons."⁴

Not sanguine about the possibilities of uncovering an oral record, Black Audio does not share the approach that informs many documentaries about minority history: that there is an intact oral history out there waiting to be tapped, recorded, and proffered to a community.⁵ While such work is important, it assumes that a history can be unproblematically reconstructed, given resources and a respite from censorship. But, to put it crudely, only certain statements are possible within a given discourse, and to make a film in which history is continuous is to concede to the naming power of those statements. As Akomfrah says, "The triumphalist vision of race and community operates on the assumption that there is essentially a core of affect that is structured around oratory, around song—giving it an irreducible unity—which wasn't present in *[Handsworth Songs]*,"⁶ and is even more conspicuously absent in *Who Needs a Heart?*

Akomfrah acknowledges that a precise form of political struggle is involved in recognizing that "the primal encounters that are our fantasies of a national history will never be validated by official British history."⁷ Thus it is important to give form to these fantasies, to express them in a way that allows viewers to identify with those struggles. Yet Akomfrah's designation of these moments as "primal encounters" also suggests that Black Audio knows them to be fictions, enabling fictions at the foundation of identity. Thus when he speaks of "an almost oedipal delight in desecrating what made the project possible in the first place,"⁸ he suggests that to fetishize the person or movement that animates the film would be to get stuck in identity politics, rather than engaging in the difficult process of transformation. Black Audio's is more similar to a body of work that wills fictions and silences to fill in the place of dysfunctional memory. *Who Needs a Heart?* excavates events that occurred in nonverbal, perhaps unconscious registers, events that would not have made it into any record, even a confessional one.

Arrested narratives: Michael and Malcolm

Who Needs a Heart? is one of three Akomfrah/Black Audio films touched by the figure of Malcolm X, the others being *Handsworth Songs* and *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993). Any history of Michael X's activities in Britain has been obscured not only by its (lack of) media representation but by the impact of the U.S. Black revolution-

ary movement. Michael disappears into Malcolm's shadow. *Handsworth Songs* depicts Malcolm X visiting London in 1965. In what is already a story several times removed a woman is recalled to have told a journalist that 'she remembered Malcolm strolling through Smethwick saying, "If this is the centre of imperialism, then we have a common struggle". For a moment, the voice of Malcolm soared over the ashes of decline.' This moment is especially moving because the newsreel footage of Malcolm X is silent, and the film's rich sound montage falls quiet for a moment too, as though catching its breath as the charismatic leader walks alone—or as though asserting his status as already a ghost, a silent icon. Newsreel footage of demonstrations inspired by Malcolm's visit follows, and still photos documenting these struggles. Already they have been reduced to ciphers, spoken by the quacking voice of the Movietone announcer or else eerily silent. Malcolm is such a powerful presence that he makes Michael and the movement around him seem derivative at best, charlatan at worst.

Black Audio is not in search of heroes. "We don't claim a personal history. We uncover another body: not a solitude, but a set of ideas."⁹ In an interview with Kass Banning, Akomfrah evokes necrophilia, the feeding off the past, as a way to describe a community's attitude toward its heroes.¹⁰ As Robert Reid-Pharr pointed out, the black community leader, safely dead, can be elevated to sainthood without the troublesome evidence of his or her living activities to tarnish the hallowed image.¹¹ Spike Lee's *X* showed that canonization is only a step from commodification. His movie pulled you *through* the bad Malcolms, the gangster and the criminal Malcolms, in order to place you securely in the company of the reformed Malcolm, eternally preserved in his state of grace and potential. Thus *X* refused the notion of a diachronic Malcolm, one in whom the various political and hooligan incarnations were bound in the present, instead creating a teleological Malcolm whose life could not be considered out of its validating chronology. Of course Lee's desire to shape Malcolm X in this way is reinforced by the inevitable and teleological qualities of conventional Hollywood cinema. Black Audio's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* was produced for broadcast on Channel 4 during the week that *X* opened in London. *Seven Songs* retraces the intellectual and political community that formed around Malcolm X, but circles the figure of Malcolm himself. In contrast to the tragic inevitability that Lee's film evokes, *Seven Songs* begins with Malcolm already dead, and

the living already beginning to construct stories from their memories of him.

Like *Seven Songs for Malcolm X, Who Needs a Heart?* opposes a linear historical movement by refusing to posit the figure of Michael X as central. Like *Seven Songs*, it begins with his death so as not to build a triumphal sense of his life. It refuses to manufacture a knowable hero. Black Audio's choice not to suss out the inner workings of the great Malcolm X reads as a poststructuralist suspicion of psychological first causes. It also reads as old-fashioned tact.

Nonverbal excavation: tableaux

Who Needs a Heart? is a lush, stylized film. Scenes are staged like near-static tableaux; any dialogue is displaced by the soundtrack; gestures are magnified like mime, or dance. These audiovisual effects reflect years of experimentation among the members of the collective. Black Audio's Reece Auguiste argues that it is necessary to "systematiz[e] the ways in which sound, image, colour, and movement signify." However, he continues, the intervention of which film is capable does not reside simply on the level of style: "Since its inception, Black Audio Film Collective has endeavoured to build a critical language, a grammar of precision, of movement and fluidity. It is a task that we feel will contribute to the enrichment of black independent film culture. An inter-disciplinary approach which is both constructive and engaging eradicates any conception which poses itself as a monolithic discourse of form."¹² Black Audio has honed a language, but

³ Ibid.

⁴ Coco Fusco, "An Interview with Black Audio Film Collective: John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson, in *Young, British, and Black: The Work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective*. (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1988), 51.

⁵ See Valerie Smith's "The Documentary Impulse in African American Film," for a thoughtful counterargument that emphasizes the continuing need for filmmakers to reconstruct African American history, positivity be damned, in *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 56-64.

⁶ Fusco, 51.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Flaherty seminar discussion.

¹⁰ John Akomfrah and Kass Banning, "Feeding of the Dead: Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary," *Border/Lines* 29/30 (1993): 28-38.

¹¹ Robert Reid-Pharr, off-the-cuff remarks after "Soul on Ice and Giovanni's Room," talk at University of Rochester, December 3, 1993.

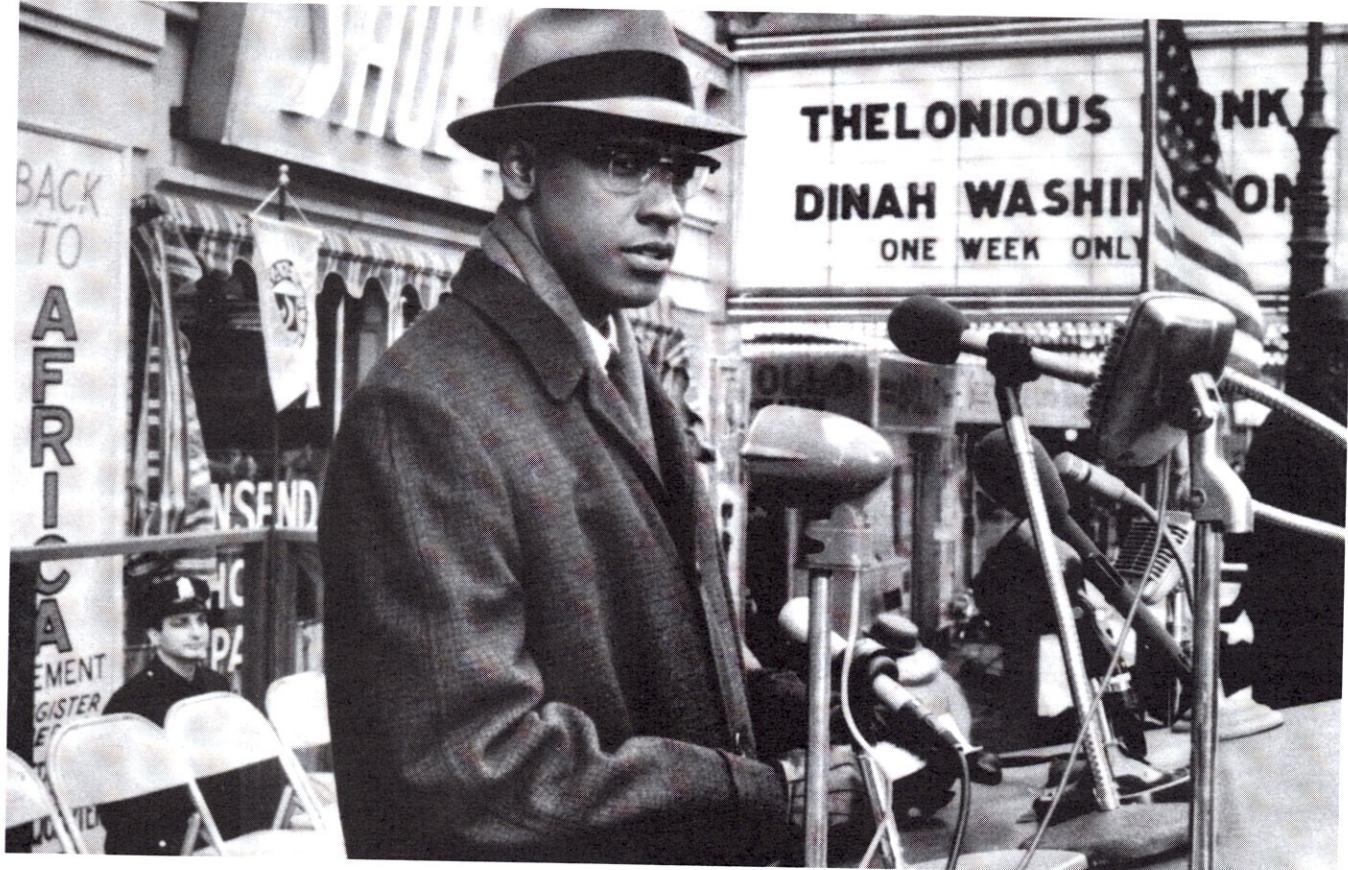
¹² Reece Auguiste/Black Audio Film Collective, "Black Independents and Third Cinema: The British Context," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen. (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 216.

Auguiste is clear that it cannot be reduced to a set of audiovisual clichés that can be applied from film to film. Rather, it is a means of response to the very different situations that films by Akomfrah, Johnson, Gopaul, Auguiste and others connected with Black Audio seek to represent.

One visual element that has evolved through the Black Audio films is tableaux, silent posed fig-

the figure of the dead leader lying on a bier, surrounded by solemn young members of the Nation of Islam (in an image reminiscent of the mourning scene of *Mysteries of July*); Malcolm (yet another look-alike actor!) standing with a birdcage surreally suspended around his head; the young Malcolm trying to snatch at books suspended above his head.

Akomfrah is explicit about the effect Black



Malcolm X

ures. Black Audio makes extensive use of tableaux in Reece Auguiste's *Mysteries of July* and in *Seven Songs for Malcolm X*. A precursor to these is the still-life elements in *Handsworth Songs*, referred to as "fetish icons" in the credits. Tableau elements are paradoxical in film, because they contradict film's mimetic relationship to sequential time.¹³ They reflexively arrest the movement of the film, calling attention to the artifice of narrative. But they also function as objects of contemplation, almost like altars.

Spike Lee's *X* is a movie in which stories are hung around the figure of a man who then, puppet-like, moves in the gestures they assign to him. Implicit in *X*, this process overtly structures *Seven Songs*. The video hangs around several minimalist, dreamlike tableaux:

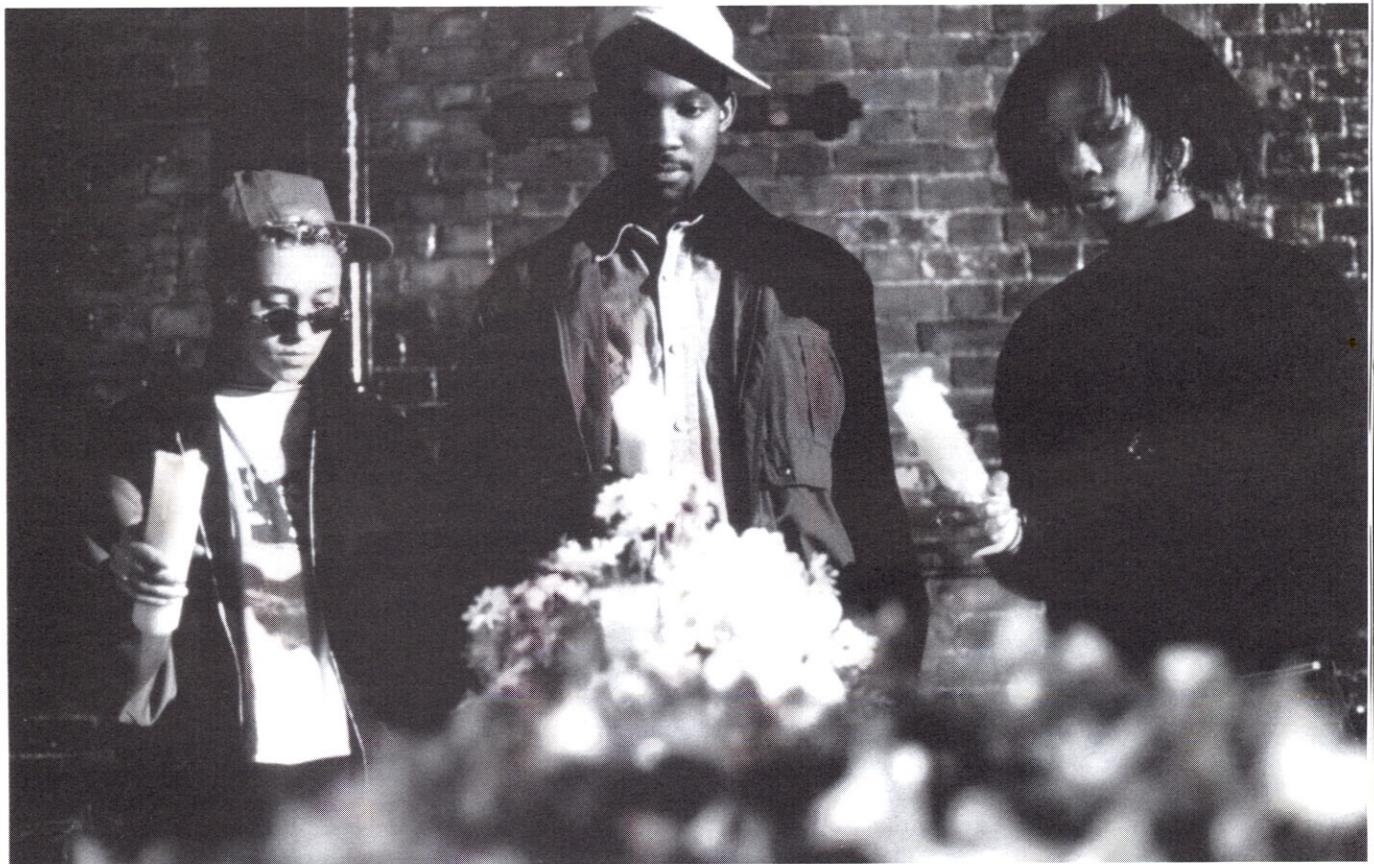
Audio intended these tableaux to produce: "They help to disrupt this notion that he came out of darkness into light. To be very specific, we tried not to light things in terms of that narrative structure. Each moment of his life was given due reverence and respect. . . . It was very much a way of getting away from starting his life in red, then orange, then blue when he dies." To alternate these scenes with the interviews that form the major part of *Seven Songs* does not so much make a "more human" Malcolm¹⁴ as demonstrate how much his life can be measured by the shifting, shimmering quality of his effects upon living others.

In the absence of opportunities for intellection, the film suggests the possibility of appealing to embodied knowledge. The memories upon which

Who Needs a Heart? is drawing seem to be memories inspired by music, by color, by the feel of fabric or skin, even by *smell*. Paradoxically for film, *Who Needs a Heart?* evokes these other forms of sensory knowledge, and thus points beyond the capacities of this medium. In other words, the knowledge conveyed by appeal to these other senses are not simply instrumental, ready to be translated into verbal

In the final scene of *Who Needs a Heart?*, Louis, being interviewed by a white journalist, explains what the lack of control over their own representation meant to the revolutionary group around Michael X: "Well um, a lot of people may not have understood what we were trying to do. When I look at you I see that you have two hands. If you lose one it will make it difficult to do the things you wanted

Mysteries of July



information. That translation may take place, but the residual non-verbal knowledges remain a repository that can only be understood in its own terms.

What is the sound of one TV station clapping?

If the historical archive is closed to critical reassessments of history, it is because the dominant media have blocked it. The structural, as well as visible, racism of the mainstream documentary media of film, television and the print press is a subject that recurs in Black Audio's works.

to do. What we were trying to do was just to get a hand, because, like, in your system you have justice, and you have the scales, the balance." He makes a balancing gesture: "If it goes down one way, that's too much, if it goes the other—there's no equality. We wanted a hand, so we could get equality." Louis's own comportment dramatizes the lack of representational access he is describing: he mumbles, his face is almost obscured by a beard, dark glasses and a hat. "And yes, the hand may turn into a fist." The lack of Black representation in the media is like

¹³ See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 61-71.

¹⁴ Kass Banning, "Feeding of the Dead: Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary." *Border/Lines* no. 29/30. 28-38.

the lack of hands Louis describes. Black Audio's purposely oblique representational strategies, their attempts to come up with a representational language, enact the intent of Louis's violent koan.

Black Audio films continually raise the problem of how to represent the struggles of the Black diasporic communities in the media, when they are so thoroughly covered from the outside. Much of *Handsworth Songs* was devoted to a critique of racist media coverage of the riots. In that film Black Audio was the only alternative news presence, and it was a belated one. The testimonies and critiques provided by people of Caribbean and South Asian descent are the only trace of the story from within the rioting neighborhoods. Even these are often told without finality, as though they are not definitive either, but merely clues to a larger story that cannot be told: "ghosts of stories." It is remarkable how this film manages to dignify events by referring to the particular people involved (such as Mrs. Cynthia Jarret, who died during a police raid of her house), while at the same time generalizing their effects so that they can be understood as pervasive. The news media, contend and later the Hollywood auteur, argue that Black Audio critiques do the opposite: concentrating their attention on "tragic" events and remarkable individuals so as to disperse awareness of structural problems and the capacity of individuals to be precious without being known and named.

Similarly, *Testament* (1988) is structured by the obstacles that confront a Black journalist who returns to her Ghanaian home to do a story on the fall of the Nkrumah government. This time the presence that thwarts the Black media's intervention is not other media people but another filmmaker, Werner Herzog, who is doing a film about Nkrumah at the same time. Reece Auguiste's *Mysteries of July* (1991) focuses on the silences in the British media about police violence against Black youth. And even *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* sets itself up against a hegemonic representation, this time another auteur, Spike Lee. The cumulative effect of these struggles is an increasing desire not to set the record straight but to thwart positive knowledge. When you are so thoroughly told from the outside, it suggested, it is nearly impossible to have a story left to tell, at least a story not entirely in the form of a negative bricolage: "we did not do this, they omitted to say that...."

By the time of *Who Needs a Heart?* it seems that Akomfrah's strategy in representing Black British struggles is to devote an entire film to "the ghosts of other stories." This requires not simply an engaged

viewer, but a viewer who is willing to relinquish a certain form of knowing, in the form of positivities, and instead accept a knowledge based on traces.

Memories from elsewhere: style

While it is necessary to create alternative stories for the Black diasporan people in Britain, this story telling is not the simple filling in of truth. It takes will to recall memories of what was suppressed in dominant histories. But also there are other things it is useful to remember besides history. "You become aware that the diasporic is an act of will and memory because there are very few institutions that can substantiate that presence. . . . These are acts of will and memory and the very mode of remembering is essential for any historic project and I am not talking about just the very obvious mode of remembering history."¹⁵

At first glance *Who Needs a Heart?* appears to replay politics as style: black leather indicates alliance with the black liberation movement; women's headscarves indicate Islam, kente cloth indicates Afrocentrism. Or does the film excavate a political history through an archaeology of fashion?

Take the question of Millie's hair. In 1965, when she begins her flirtation with Dominic, she is wearing first a luxurious mane of red curls, then a straightened, brassy-colored flip. Later the mane of curls is black. When she is in the mental hospital in 1968, her hair is small, straight, and close to her head. When she is demonstrating to free Angela Davis she wears an Afro just as luxuriant as Davis's. At Louis's wake, her hair is tied back with the Afrocentric red, yellow and green.

The issue in analyzing black hair styles is not to simplistically ascribe self-hating, Eurocentric values to black people who straighten their hair and authenticity to those who let it go "natural," Kobena Mercer argues. Spike Lee's *X* suggests such an analysis, situating Malcolm X's enlightenment at moments that also punish him for chemically straightening his hair. *Who Needs a Heart?* suggests instead that "all hair styles are political in that they articulate responses to the panoply of buried forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both personal and political 'meaning' and significance."¹⁶ Hair, like the other elements of style mobilized in *Who Needs a Heart?*, signifies the personal level at which the dance of political alliance takes hold. The characters' changing hair styles express not only the type of their political engagement but also the complex temporal rhythm of politics as it is articulated in people's lives. Thus when Naomi pulls off

Millie's wig and strokes her head, the implication is that political alliances can (and in Naomi's opinion, should) be taken off like fashion accessories.

"Why do revolutionaries sleep with their sponsors and not their wives?"

Millie's wry question, spoken in voice-over, fingers an underpinning economy of the movement. The complex of sexual and political patronage, moral and venal influence, and racial conflict begins in the wild masquerade party at the beginning of the film. Again, much of the story is told by style. In the course of a song, Naomi and Jack's sweet rendition of "My Lord What a Morning," Simmi, the tough follower of Michael X, puts the moves on Abigail, who deprecatingly resists. A slim white man (who we recognize from an earlier scene as a rent collector who worked with Michael X) hands Simmi a pistol, and patronizingly pats his face. Simmi uses his newfound might to threaten a couple of young, white Teddy boys, only partly in jest. Meanwhile Millie, the black painter, and Dominic, Abigail's husband, have been dancing and flirting like crazy. When Abigail sees them kiss, she coolly accepts Simmi's advances. And Faith, the earnest journalist, and Louis, the artist and spokesperson for Michael X, are making love behind a vast red curtain.

This erotically charged scene prefigures the shifting alliances to come. Many of the black and white main characters encounter each other in costume, and find each other compelling to the degree that they are elaborately disguised; but there is also a sense that everybody's outfits, including Simmi's black leather and Naomi's sweet pastel gown, are costumes of a sort. The party is in a theater, and the sexual encounters that set off the film's complex series of liaisons take place on a stage. Thus, already the film puts in play the distinctions between the authentic and charlatan, with "passing," and with the use of disguise to move among different class circles.

Only recently have scholars and artists such as Michele Wallace, bell hooks and Clarissa Sligh begun to look at the sexual politics of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements: not just in terms of "the women behind the men who made the movement," but the whole libidinal economy of the movement, the circulation of sexual, cultural, and political capital. To understand the film's interracial sexual relationships in terms of this circulation avoids the moralizing response, or embarrassed silence, that tends to meet this issue. The party scenes in *Who Needs a Heart?*, in which sexual, cul-

tural, political, and financial capital circulate as freely as dope and whiskey, demonstrate this dynamic. Each subsequent year, indicated by titles in the film, is marked by a party—"a gathering, really," as Louis protests—at Dominic and Abigail's country house. Money changes hands between the aristocrats and the revolutionaries, and a variety of sexual congress (but always heterosexual) take place. The territorial games are as complex as chess.

The long-term effects of all this political ferment appear to be as insubstantial as fashion. By the end of the film the status quo returns abruptly, at least for those with power. Michael X dies dishonored. Abigail and Dominic depart rather shame-facedly from the others' lives after Michael X is arrested. Faith, the committed white woman, has a child with Louis and tries unsuccessfully to make him choose between them and taking arms in the movement. Millie, the black artist and party girl, is institutionalized, and it is hard not to connect her mental distress with the use that has been made of her both by Dominic, protected by his silver spoon, and the ineffectual Sydney.

And Naomi, whose only vicissitude is in deciding what religion is to be the means of her unflagging devotion, ends up being the emotional support of the movement. She sends a note to Millie: "I'm tired of all the demonstrations since 1965. I'm tired of you coming around here with yet another slogan on your placard. I've been playing mother to both you and Sydney, and it's wearing me out."

The three women perform rituals two times, once in jest and once in earnest. After the news of Michael X's execution, Louis kills himself, perhaps accidentally. The women mourn him: the two black women support the body of Louis's white lover as she weeps uncontrollably. They burn incense around her head. Naomi bends Faith's head down to kiss the coffin. In an earlier scene, the Black House has been established and Michael X's supporters are beginning to amass money and weapons, but Michael himself has been arrested. Millie, who is making a film, shoots this scene: "After the I-Ching, Naomi, Faith and I discover Africa." This year Millie and Faith are in Indian jewelry and long ringlets. Again, their words are obscured by music, but the women's high-strung, affectionate way with each other is clear. They can't stop giggling, but

¹⁵ John Akomfrah, in Fusco.

¹⁶ Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," in *Out There: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990), 251.

Millie wants to get it right on the first take. Naomi holds up a string of cowrie shells for Faith to kiss, like a rosary. Faith kisses it and then, laughing, pulls it into her mouth. Millie, angry, bursts into tears.

The moment of erotic intimacy between the women is memorable both for their unholy mingling of sacred and sensual acts and for the sense that they are founding a body at least as powerful as, and perhaps subversive of, the armed strength that the men are attempting to found. And it is the three women who perform the rituals that express the tension pent up in the rest of the movie, which is certainly not released in verbal exchanges.

Since practically all rational discourse is muted in the film, it is not a question of the women occupying the emotional role to balance the men's rational action. In fact, the muting of most of the fine-sounding words strips actions to their affective core in the case of every character in the film. I choose to focus on the women's rituals in particular because they remain intact despite the film's silencing strategy, and are thus repositories of the meaning that is stripped from other elements of the story.

Black Audio members have been highly ambivalent about representation of sexuality. In part this may be because, hard-core Foucauldians that they are, they see sexuality as a system through which extra-sexual issues of control are spoken.

"Blacks are expected to be transgressive in English cultural life. To me this is just as wearying, just as draining as the old 'you must be the conscience of the nation' approach. . . . We don't have the strength or the energy. So there may be reticence around these questions on our part."¹⁷

This reticence can be seen as an old-fashioned lefty prudishness, or as an unwillingness to distinguish categories of experience. In refusing to deal in terms of identity politics, Black Audio suggests that politics shifts among different registers. *Who Needs a Heart?* finds a way to deal with the register of sexual politics without reducing all politics to sexual politics.

Gayle Rubin's important riposte to structural anthropology, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex,"¹⁸ established that, in a patriarchal society, women can be understood as signifiers of value in the exchange among men. Drawing from Rubin, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes of the circulation of women as one of the ways that *value* is recoded between different registers. Following Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of capital, Spivak sees social existence as a movement that recodes specific qualities into abstract value. If this is the case, then every instance of so-called marginality

can be exchanged for a provisional position of power, and vice versa. As Spivak writes, every commitment is negotiable when this power of abstraction holds.

For the long haul emancipatory social intervention is not primarily a question of redressing victimage by the assertion of a (class- or gender- or ethno-cultural) identity. It is a question for developing a vigilance for systematic appropriations of the unacknowledged social production of a *differential* that is one basis of exchange into the networks of the cultural politics of class- or gender- *identification*.¹⁹

Again, my point is emphatically *not* that gender relations hold the key to all other social relations. Women's presence in *Who Needs a Heart?* is presented as primarily sexual. Yet private lives and sexual relations take a central place in this supposed documentary about the Black Power movement, and the literal exchanges that take place at the junctures of sexual and political congress show us places where value is recoded. As Millie says in voice-over at one point, "Now everybody is saying, 'What can I gain from this? Will I regret it later?' But what's later when you're desperate now?"

Who Needs a Heart? pushes to a limit the suspicion of positivity that has animated all Black Audio's work, and that is its most radical intervention. Clear political values are dissipated by fictional reenactments, obscured by music, befuddled by motivations no purer than the next person's. For all our poststructuralist hipness, many critics still cling to an idea of fundamental political clarity such as what glows from the heart of *Testament*, *Handsworth Songs*, and other Black Audio films. But what distinguishes *Who Needs a Heart?* at this point in the careers of Black Audio and of Akomfrah in particular is its acknowledgment of the limits of an excavation approach to documentary representation, and an approach to documentary representation that eludes the verbal altogether. When the verbal archive is silent, information is revealed that was never verbal to begin with.²⁰

¹⁷ John Akomfrah, in Fusco, 54-55.

¹⁸ Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter. (New York:Monthly Review, 1975), 157-210.

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Marginality in the Teaching Machine," in *Outside n the Teaching Machine*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62-63.

²⁰ My thanks to members of Black Audio Film Collective for their generosity with interviews and information, and to Douglas Crimp for helpful comments during the course of this writing. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Luce Foundation and the American Council of Learned Scholars.

GUESS WHO ELSE IS COMING TO DINNER:

The issue of inter-racial sexual desire is highly problematic within American culture. "Miscegenation," defined as sexual relations between black and white characters, was severely censored for many years under the Hays code. As the representational space where questions of racial and sexual identity converge, inter-racial sex maintains an aura of taboo (as can be witnessed in any TV date-based game show). Debates around questions of racial and sexual representation can benefit from a re-evaluation of the structures of portrayals of inter-racial sex in Hollywood narrative. One recent film that particularly calls upon conventional cultural constructions of race and sexuality is Bernard Rose's 1992 film *Candyman*, based on a short story by Clive Barker, epitomizing the pathologizing tendency of conventional representations of inter-racial desire. Utilizing the horror genre, *Candyman* plays with the fear of and desire for inter-racial sex between black men and white women, a particularly charged part of sexual discourse. At the heart of horror's generic narrative is the repression of aspects of sexuality. What rebounds from this repression is a monstrous form of sexual desire. In *Candyman*, the nature of repressed sexuality is tied up with race; it is the fear and horror of miscegenation—the potential of white women's attraction for black men, and vice versa. *Candyman* takes the fear of miscegenation to an extended, monstrous form when the black male body becomes the grotesque site for the eruption of these racial/sexual fears and the white woman's body the site where these fears are played out. Yet there is an elusiveness in the film's treatment of a double stereotype of excessively sexual black masculinity and white feminine purity, creating an ambiguity in the film. The film evokes these stereotypes, yet through its supernatural horror narrative takes them to an excess that starts to deconstruct their representational function.

In *Candyman*, two anthropology graduate students, Helen (Virginia Madsen) and Bernadette (Kasi Lemmons), from the University of Illinois in Chicago investigate urban folklore. Through interviews they become interested in the mythical figure of Candyman. As their investigation contin-

Racial/ Sexual Hysteria in *Candyman*

by
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ues, they learn the legend of a black man brutally murdered in the Cabrini Green public housing projects of Chicago at the turn of the century because of his sexual liaison with a white woman. The man's ghost continues to haunt Chicago and he can be invoked by calling his name into a mirror five times. When called, he appears with a hook attached to the bloody stump of his hand and does dastardly deeds. The film develops the relationship between the Candyman (Tony Todd) and the white anthropologist, Helen. Helen is the protagonist, a middle-class white academic married to an anthropology professor.

Candyman is a complex film that invites multiple and, often, contradictory readings. Such aspects as the geographical cityscape and urban planning are used to explore the issue of boundaries and the fear invoked by the transgression of designated spaces, the boundaries established between the binary oppositions between black and white; male and female; middle class and working class.

Through the use of graphic transitional sequences, *Candyman* establishes the cityscape location as a vital part of the film. The city is represented graphically as a geometric play of lines and spaces, roads that divide the city into territories on the basis of race and class. The spatial territories take on narrative significance as Helen's investigation of the Candyman's murders lead her to the architectural discovery that the condominium building in which she lives is built on the same plan as Cabrini Green. The ghetto building is cut off from the "gold coast" by the highway and the "El", whereas her building is on the other side of this barrier. Hence, the building "on the right side of the tracks" has been converted to luxury condos. In this scene Helen and her African-American co-researcher Bernadette are in Helen's luxury apartment. Helen displays her plans for the two buildings. She then opens the curtains of the window to demonstrate the difference between the apartment buildings' locations. The cityscape becomes an aesthetic backdrop to her luxury home, the white woman's traditional domestic space, and Helen's window looks out to display the territories of the city, the space beyond her control. Her gaze is above the life of the streets, aestheticized for her behind the safety of her window. Helen continues her investigation of the ghetto and its crimes from the comfort of her own home.

Later in the film there is a parallel scene that resonates with this one. After having been implicated in one of Candyman's crimes, Helen views her slides of Cabrini Green in her living room. This

time, instead of opening the curtains on the cityscape, she closes them and projects images of the city—the ghetto—onto the wall of her home. This is another disruption of bounded space, bringing the forbidden parts of the city into her home, internalizing an exterior space. The images of the seedy, rundown ghetto apartment contrast graphically with the beauty and order of her surroundings. This scene ends with the violent arrival of Candyman into Helen's home.

The horror moment of *Candyman* takes place through this double crossing of boundaries. Helen leaves her safe world and the academic spaces of the university to investigate Cabrini Green, the space beyond her control. This invokes the retaliation of Candyman, who crosses the space from the inner-city black projects into Helen's spaces and life - the university and, most disturbingly, her home. He enters through the bathroom mirror, an entrance invoking many symbolic interpretations. He breaks through from behind the mirror, violently putting an end to any narcissistic contemplation, or interaction, Helen might have with her self-image.

Freud's famous article that contextualizes the uncanny foregrounds the space of the home and the familiar, and its relationship to the uncanny. Freud suggests that the home is a memory of the womb, "the former *Heim* (home) of all human beings,"¹ and that this is a source of uncanniness for men about female genitalia. The space of the home is an imperative of the horror genre (e.g., the many *Nightmares on Elm Street*).² Often, as with *Candyman*, the home in the horror film is associated with women victims—a home penetrated and disrupted by a phallic killer. *Candyman* situates the horror of past racism, the lynching of the living Candyman character in the nineteenth century, in the present-day home of a white, liberal, middle-class couple.

Helen's invocation of the Candyman is a complex process. In comparison to the earlier invocations of the Candyman, Helen summons him in the mirror as a joke with Bernadette, but it is not until the later parallel scene that he arrives, not from behind her, but from behind the mirror. With the exception of the story in the opening sequence, Candyman's other appearances are in the black ghetto community to which he symbolically belongs and where he is seen "at home." At the same time, he has to be "invited" into white people's homes. This invitation not only takes the form of summoning in the mirror, it is also through association with the sexual and intellectual excesses of white women.

The opening sequence invocation of Candyman bears resemblances and important differences to Helen's interest in him. The story is told in flashback. Narratively, it is justified as an interview that Helen is conducting with a freshman girl about urban folklore. She tells the story of Candyman's murder of a young baby-sitter in a suburban home. The victim, Claire, is in the process of seducing a local motorcycle-riding "bad boy," Billy. They summon Candyman in the mirror as a test game with each other. Claire, in the absence of Billy, finally completes the summons and is violently murdered by Candyman.

Candyman functions in this story as the racial other that embodies the sexuality of the white relationship. As Tania Modleski suggests in *Feminism Without Women*, black characters often function in dominant Hollywood narratives as embodiment of the sexuality of white relationships.³ Candyman's invocation is used as erotic foreplay for Claire and Billy. As Billy calls his name, he simultaneously caresses Claire's breasts. She resists, he fails some manhood courage test by not completing the five Candymans. His invocation is a way for the characters to express their desires. Claire uses Candyman as a way to initiate. She displaces her desires on or through Candyman, disavowing her own sexuality onto the black male "other." Candyman, unlike some of the examples Modleski suggests, oversteps this erotic function of black commentary on white sexuality through his excessive masculinity and hyper-phallic status. Unlike the black women who can embody aspects of the natural and eroticize white relationships in safe terms, Candyman's sexuality is excessive and ultimately destructive.

Candyman's arrival is not the perfect completion of Claire's desire for sex with Billy. Instead, he functions as a punishment for Claire for harboring those desires. Representing the monstrous excessive sexuality of the black man in the racial unconscious, Candyman brings not sexual satisfaction, but a violent death. This can be seen as an unconscious desire on the part of Claire for the bad boy, but also as punishment for her desires. This use of Candyman as the punishment for sexual desires is in line with generic conventions of the slasher/horror film. As Carol Clover illustrates in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*: "killing those who seek and engage in unauthorized sex amounts to a generic imperative of the slasher film."⁴

Candyman also functions in this scene in a more complex way, as the horror of the other, the

unknown and unexplained threat that contrasts with the normality of the white middle-class existence. He represents the fear that "we are not safe in our 'safe' homes". He also represents the fear of unleashing internal desires, both sexual and violent.

Claire contrasts with Helen in interesting ways. They are the only people who willingly invoke the Candyman. They are both blonde and conventionally beautiful—a white femininity that contrasts most with Candyman's black masculinity. Candyman is clearly their racial and gender opposite. Helen is less sexual than Claire. Claire's invocation of Candyman is mostly related to her sexual desires—a way of simultaneously testing and impressing Billy. Helen's interest is academic, yet with a similar aspect of transgression. As Claire transgresses the expected sexual passivity of white femininity, Helen transgresses her social positioning through her intellectual activity. She is attempting to invoke the Candyman to demystify or deny his powers, thereby proving her intellectual superiority to those who still believe in him, freshman college kids and the African-American ghetto community.

Helen's process of demystifying Candyman's myth is played out as an attempt to fix the narratives and sub-narratives of the legend. The tension is developed between the different ways of transmitting this story; the verbal recounting that maintains the Candyman myth, and the documenting of the stories with the intent to disprove them. The film subtly critiques Helen's anthropological impulses. In the first part of the film (before we actually see Candyman), there is a repeated motif of storytelling. These serve narratively to give the back-story to the Candyman legend. A series of verbal accounts of Candyman include: the freshman in the opening scene, Kitty the cleaner, Anne-Marie, Purcell (the snotty long-haired academic) and Jake. These accounts are substantiated by the newspaper report and Helen's investigation. Helen's process is to doc-

¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII*, ed. James Strachey. (London: the Hogarth Press, 1964), 219-253.

² For example *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Also see Vivian Sobchack, "Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange," *Camera Obscura* 15 (1986): 6-35.

³ Tania Modleski *Feminism Without Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Interestingly in relation to Modleski's discussion of embodiment is the fact that Candyman technically does not have a body anymore, but exists in ghost form. He is a disembodied embodiment that displaces the sexual onto the violent.

⁴ Carol J. Clover *Men, Women and Chainsaws*. (London: BFI, 1989), 37.

ument these accounts; you see her recording them, entering them on computer and photographing them, attempting to capture and disprove Candyman's legend. The newspaper stories are unreliable journalism; they are elusive and inconclusive by nature; they cannot tell who Candyman is, or who committed the crimes. Candyman's announces his own form of representation when he says to Helen, "I am the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom, without these things I am nothing." He is represented not only through the stories but through the graffiti also. Unlike the work of the painter Candyman, who was killed to make way for the killer Candyman, graffiti is an elusive artform, always under threat of being removed or altered, and is not "fixed" in the sense of a revered art object.

Helen attempts to fix the elusive verbal stories into a containable narrative form, and through this containment disprove them. The perpetuation of Candyman as myth depends on his elusiveness and being uncontained within the boundaries of safe narrative. This concept of fixing relates to Homi Bhabha's discussion of stereotypes:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of otherness. As the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation, it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.⁵

Bhabha's idea of the ambivalence of the play between the fixedness of the stereotype and its constant repetition is at play in this film. *Candyman* is fundamentally about the stereotype of black male sexual excess. It is a film that is, however, complex and slippery in its ideological stance toward that stereotype. There seems to be a play at the heart of the film with the construction of the stereotype, as Bhabha defines that construction. The film's ambivalence arises from the tension between Helen's attempt to fix Candyman, and with him black masculinity, into controlled discourse and the elusiveness of Candyman's legend—the cycle of killing that must be, in Bhabha's words, "anxiously repeated."⁶

This tension at the heart of the film is similar to the play between a rational explanation for the horrific events portrayed and a supernatural explanation. This play is central to what Tzvetan Todorov defines as "the Fantastic." Todorov theorizes the fantastic genre as occupying the space of hesitation between

what is perceived in the text as rational or supernatural. On an initial level, this doubt is experienced by a character in the film. It also extends beyond the experience of that character into the perception of the reader/viewer. The fantastic is experienced as moments of textual doubt, both on the digetic level and projecting these onto the viewer. The issue of perception is central in this. The audience is offered the central character with whom to identify, in this case Helen, so that it experiences the doubt through her. Beyond the character's doubt is also the audience's doubt in the veracity of that character's perceptions of the action, producing a further level of ambiguity. The social functioning of the fantastic genre, as defined by Todorov, is also of interest. He suggests that the fantastic genre, with hesitation between the rational and supernatural explanations (the "uncanny" and the "marvelous"), allows socially taboo subjects to come into play in discourse.⁷

In *Candyman* this play between rational and supernatural explanations is central to a reading of the film. Despite what the film shows in graphic visual terms, of the murdering practices of Candyman, all the audience witnesses of these events are either structured as flashbacks, as people recount the urban folklore tales of Candyman's works, or from Helen's point of view. The rational explanation is offered, for those who would wish to accept it, that Helen is the crazy person responsible for the deaths of the dog, of Bernadette, of the doctor and the abduction of the child. In this rational reading Candyman is a figment of Helen's imagination. She is insane, committing murders that she attributes to a fictional character. The hesitation that Todorov sees as a prerequisite for the fantastic is, arguably, sustained throughout the film and beyond. A convenient explanation could be given for all the murders.

The rational reading of the Candyman murders do not lessen the impact on racial discourse. In fact, the ambivalence between these two explanations heightens the obsession with racialized codes. One third of the way through the film, an artificial closure is reached. Helen proves rationally, with police help, that the Candyman murders are attributable to Cabrini Green drug dealers. During a visit to the projects alone, Helen meets a boy who shows her a public toilet, claiming it as the location of one of Candyman's victims. In the story that the boy recounts, part of which is shown in flashback, a boy, described as retarded, leaves his mother in a grocery store to use the toilet. While there, he is attacked by Candyman, his genitals cut off and thrown in the

toilet. After hearing the story, Helen enters the scene of the crime to photograph it. It is defaced with graffiti, some of which is feces, writing the slogan "sweets to the sweet"—indicating Candyman's presence. She opens one stall, raises the lid and in the toilet is a nest of bees—also associated with the Candyman and his demise. After she examines the second stall, with a broken toilet, four African-American men come and attack Helen. One holds her, as another smashes her eye with a hook.

Helen's encounter with the four men (by implication drug dealers⁸ and according to the police officer gang members) is the real turning point of the film. It offers the first rational explanation for the Candyman murders in Cabrini Green. If the rational explanation is followed through then it is also the moment that Helen turns from a "normal" middle-class academic woman into a psychotic killer. Through this encounter with aggressive, underclass black men, Helen internalizes the myth of Candyman and starts acting it out. During the abduction in the toilet she is merely struck in the eye with a hook. The position of the scene within the structure of the story, however, makes the act of violence take on even greater significance. The attack on her eyes can be seen as an attempt to blind her, to put an end to her investigating gaze. Helen has crossed the line. She has seen too much of the lives and fears of Cabrini Green people. It is her curiosity, her desire to see for herself, that has led her to this place.⁹

Helen's tendency to cross borders takes on further meaning in this scene. She not only crosses racial and class spatial borders, in entering the men's room, she crosses a gender line. Throughout the film, and in the short story on which it was based, Helen's academic ambition is for her research to exceed that of her husband, Trevor, and of the character Purcell (underdeveloped in the translation from movie to film). She is aided by Bernadette but not in competition with her. Helen's ambition to exceed the men she works with is what leads her to trouble and to Cabrini Green. It could be argued that she is attempting to exceed the limitations of gender placed on her, metaphorically crossing the line into the male-dominated territory of the university as she crosses the line into the men's room of the public toilet. Her beating in this toilet and subsequent battles with Candyman could be seen as a punishment for transgressing socially proscribed gender roles, as well as positions of class and race.

Also at play in this scene is the threat that popular culture represents of the rape of white women by black men. If we look at not only what happens in

this scene but also take into account the cultural myths of inter-racial sexuality and the subsequent action of the film—particularly in the case of the rational explanation—this scene functions as a symbolic rape scene. If this explanation is followed, Helen's change from sane to insane is traceable from this moment. By internalizing the Candyman myth, she is in some sense possessed by Candyman. The construction of white female purity is relevant to the way this scene is structured. Blackness is equated with the impure, and fear and horror is inspired by the penetration of the "pure" white woman by the racial other. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* invests in the idea of blackness signifying sexual excess for white women, a sexual excess equated with madness.¹⁰ Helen's investigation of black masculinity, in the rational reading of the film, leads to madness.

The other side of this rational/irrational split is the supernatural—the Candyman. Following the narrative as supernatural, the racial and sexual themes also predominate. Helen's fascination with the Candyman originates in an academic interest in proving his non-existence, therefore proving herself superior to those who still hold a primitive superstitious belief in him. The interest develops after the turning point in the film where she has ostensibly proved that his existence has a rational explanation. What then occurs is a battle between her and the Candyman for the life of Anne-Marie's child and for Helen's return to normality.

Although adversarial, the relationship that develops between Helen and the Candyman is eroticized and is played out as a coming together of the abnormal couple that is common to the horror genre. The generic tradition epitomized by such horror classics as *Dracula* is of the monstrous terrorizing the "normal" world, in some way intimately connected with a white women character who is his opposite. The scenes between Helen and Candyman are strongly erotic; Candyman is trying to seduce Helen into death. In one scene he asks for a kiss,

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

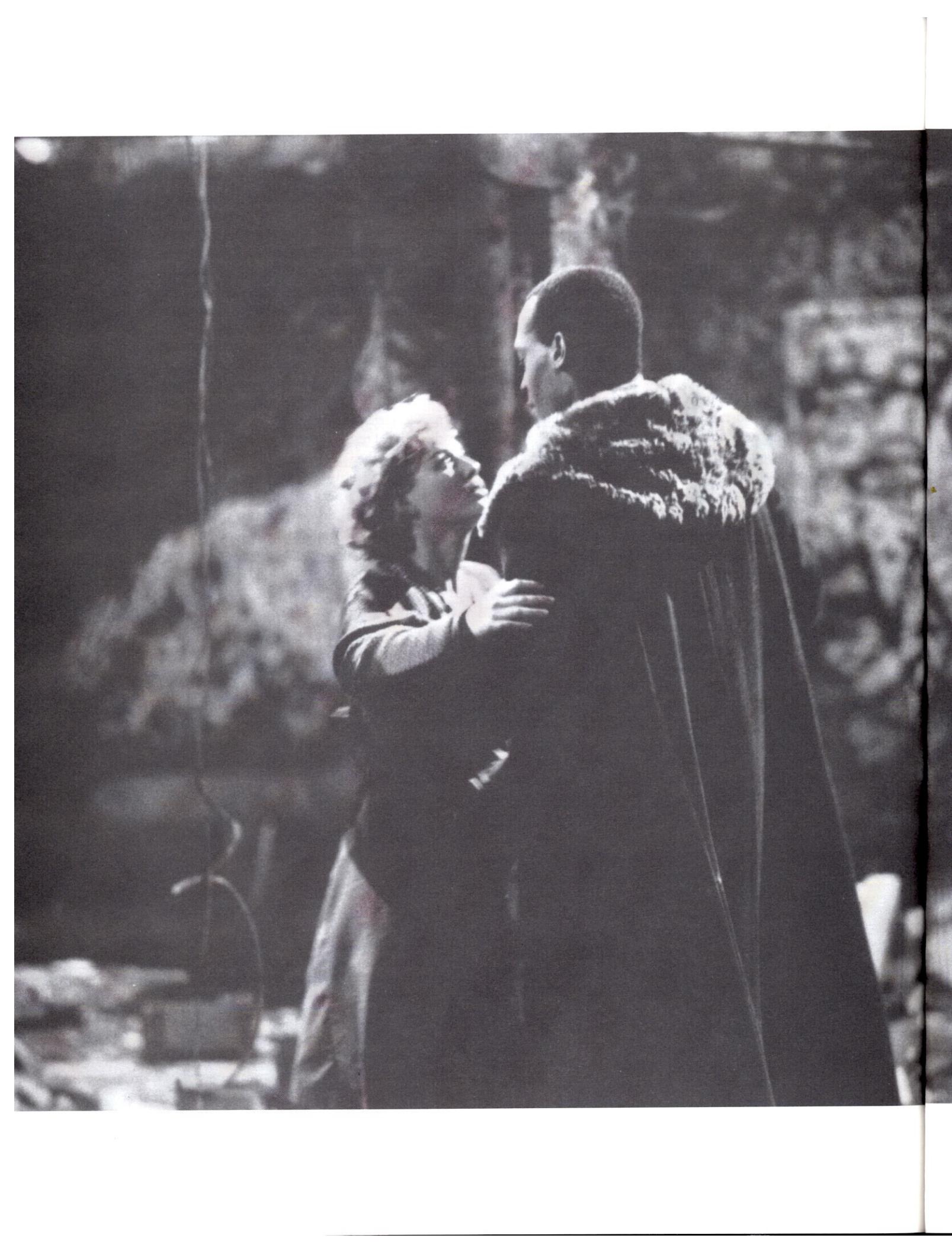
⁶ Bhabha, 66.

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*. (The Press of Case Western University, 1973).

⁸ The word "candyman" is used as slang for a drug dealer.

⁹ Freud's discussion in "The Uncanny" of the fear of damage to the eyes as displaced sexual anxiety is also relevant here. See also Samuel Weber "The Sideshow, Or: Remarks on a Canny Moment" *MLN* 88/6 Dec. 1973.

¹⁰ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 171.





which she resists. After Helen realizes the failure of her marriage, her next encounter with Candyman is a scene of passion and seduction. Candyman asks her to surrender to him, in exchange for releasing the child he is holding hostage. He carries her across the room and lays her on a coffin-like slab. He then caresses her with his hook, running it up her skirt as he continues his seduction speech. She caresses him, but in doing so discovers his flesh is eaten away and swarming with bees. As he kisses her bees emerge from his mouth, turning the seduction horrific and grotesque. In the scene that follows, Candyman and Helen are burning together in the pyre built and lit by the Cabrini Green residents. He holds her back as she tries to escape with the child. Here they recreate Candyman's lost family, and momentarily display the potential of a mixed-race family before Helen escapes to return the child to its mother. These final scenes that unite Helen and Candyman follow Helen's attempt to return to Trevor from the psychiatric hospital. She goes home to find that Trevor's young student girlfriend has moved in to her home. Parallel to the early scenes of Candyman's invasion of her home, Helen is faced with Stacey, a figurative, if not literal, "home-wrecker." The failure of her relationship with Trevor, the feeling that he is treacherous and unworthy, increases Candyman's grotesque attractiveness.

Helen's relationship to Candyman is complex. Toward the end of the film it is implied that she is the lover he died for, reborn. She sees in his home her own face on the mural portraying his death. Helen's sexuality is tied up with that of the Candyman. Inter-racial desire functions as the taboo broken that lets loose the narrative of horror. In this there is no racial ambiguity. The characters are played for maximum contrast. Helen is an unambiguous white blonde woman and Candyman is unambiguously a black man. Helen's femininity is highlighted, as it also highlights her cultured, frail, "pure" whiteness. Her whiteness ultimately goes beyond the positive associations to the realm of the negative as Helen reaches a stage of power and immortality in death. In death she is recoded as hyper-white. Through this power she can return to revenge herself on Trevor, who symbolizes part of her mortal ineffectiveness. As Richard Dyer suggests in his article "White," whiteness is coded in Hollywood films as synonymous with positive associations or, at least, with normalizing ones. He develops the trajectory where "white" taken to the ultimate point can represent death, as blackness is sometimes seen to represent life.¹¹ Helen looks more the part of the dead brought to life than Candyman does. Her death brings her past the created whiteness of her coffin (where she appears made up, is surrounded by flowers, in a white gown) to the whiteness of her immortality. Here in the scene where she returns from the

¹¹ Richard Dyer, "White," *A Matter of Images*. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

dead, her whiteness is extreme and ghostlike. Her killing of Trevor is particularly phallic and orgasmic. Death and sex are ultimately intertwined in the horror film—in the words of Candyman—“a tale to make lovers cling closer in their rapture.”

To reach this immortal state, where she ambiguously either replaces or is joined with Candyman, she must take on some of his racial characteristics, figuratively turning dark through the fire that chars her body. Helen’s body becomes the symbolic grotesque site for the potential of mixed race, inter-racial desire. Helen also takes on blackness in her unconscious state when she “blacks out”—generally the time when the murders are committed. The burning is a peculiar scene that replays Candyman’s death at the hands of the white lynch mob.¹² As Candyman was destroyed by the nineteenth century white community, Helen is killed by the black community; both sides wittingly or unwittingly destroy the potential of the mixed race family.

Candyman’s relationship to Helen relates to his past and the myth of his creation. As Carol Clover points out, there is a psycho-sexual motivation for the killings in many horror films. Starting with the prime example of *Psycho*, she shows the trauma of gender confusion, incestuous families and traumatic childhood experiences motivating the actions of slasher films’ killers.¹³ Candyman’s moment of conversion to monster is racial as well as sexual. His death at the hands of the white lynch mob is for the racially and sexually motivated crime of miscegenation. For this, his hand is cut off, he is beaten, covered in honey and then left near a beehive, where he is stung to death. Once dead his body is burned and the ashes scattered over Cabrini Green, where he returns to haunt the populous. Candyman’s death is a symbolic castration that turns his loss of sexual power into the murderous hyper-phallic hook.

Candyman’s destructive capacity originates from his castration/death, which is motivated by what Homi Bhabha identifies in Fanon as the racial primal scene—the moment where the system of racial otherness is called into place.

There are two primal scenes in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*: two myths of the origin of the marking of the subject within the racist practices and discourses of a colonial culture. On one occasion a white girl fixes Fanon in a look and turns to identify with her mother....“look, a Negro...Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened”....Equally, he stresses the primal

moment when the child encounters racial and cultural stereotypes in children’s fictions, where white heroes and black demons are proffered as points of ideological and psychical identification.¹⁴

The moment when Candyman becomes killer is the moment when he is identified as “Black Man” rather than just “Man,” this moment is synonymous with castration and death. Candyman is identified as black, and that moment symbolically functions as the turning point from not just man to black man, but becomes by extension the stereotype of black masculinity - monstrous and demonic.

White feminine purity and black hyper masculinity are stereotypes at the heart of conventional racial representation. Disproving these stereotypes is one approach to criticism, as is the process of allowing for or validating the possibility of non-horrific inter-racial sexual expression. *Candyman*, as a product of stereotypical expectations, can illuminate some of the ways in which these stereotypes are structured and how these structures operate. It also shows evidence of the places where the excess of these representations point to both the contradictions and the attractions that allow these stereotypes to perpetuate.

Candyman is a dense and complex film in its structuring of racial and sexual fears and stereotypes. It is full of elusive ambiguities as well as conventional representations. Following a pattern of Hollywood horror films, it deals with potentially interesting and transgressive content, but without recourse to any type of formal experimentation or innovation. It also demonstrates a complexity of its structures of identification as the audience crosses gender and racial identification lines. This is most satisfactorily (to me) played out in the last scene. The final pleasure the film offers, its most predictable moment, is the ritualistic, orgasmic and brutal destruction of the treacherous white male, liberal academic—a morsel of pleasure for the non-white—male in a white male world.

¹² The motivation for the bonfire is clearer in the short story - it is built and burnt for Guy Fawkes day. The translation to the film and U.S. context lacks a motivation for what Jake just describes as “the party.”

¹³ Carol J. Clover, *Women and Chainsaws* (London: BFI, 1989), 26-30.

¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, 76.



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